Mon
Ami Pierrot
And Other Plays

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by Carroll Fitzhugh

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MON AMI PIERROT

and Other Plays

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BY

CARROLL FITZHUGH

Boston and New York
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MON AMI PIERROT

PLAY IN ONE ACT

CHARACTERS

Annie, 68
John Christopher Tucker, 52
Eleanor Tucker, 49
Janet Williams, 22
Rita Francis, 25
Harry O'Day, 19

MON AMI PIERROT

The action takes place in an upstairs sitting-room at the Tuckers'. The room is both charming and homelike. Doors Right and Center. Fireplace Left, with windows either side. Large table Right Center. Sofa near fire with work-table by it. Center door is hung with portières.

The time is eight P.M.

As curtain rises, ANNIE, *an elderly maidservant, comes in Center, carrying tray with whiskey decanter, sodawater, and glass. She stops and smiles with a sort of grim indulgence as she hears a man's voice off Right, cheerily whistling 'Au clair de la lune.' Sets tray on table Center and knocks at door Right.*

MAN'S VOICE

Hello!

ANNIE

It's the drink, Mr. Tucker. Will you be having it in there, or will I ——

VOICE

Just leave it on the table, Annie.

[ANNIE *goes to Center door, wagging her head.*]

Oh, Annie, wait a second. I've got a job for you.

ANNIE

[*With hands folded on apron.*] What'll it be, Mr. Tucker?

[JOHN TUCKER *comes in Right. He is a good-*

looking man of fifty-two, with gray hair and middle-aged figure, but a red and jovial face. He wears the loose trousers of a Pierrot costume, with soft shirt and carries a Pierrot pump. He has a pump on one foot and a bedroom slipper on the other.]

TUCKER

See, Annie. This rosette is loose. Just hanging by a thread. Will you just tighten it up for me like the angel that you are? Sit right down here and do it. I think there's some thread in Mrs. Tucker's bag somewhere —— [*Looking around room.*]

ANNIE

Never trouble your head, sir. I could lay me hand on every stray bit o' thread in the house, blindfold. [*Gets bag from work-table, and sits near it.*]

TUCKER

[*Pouring whiskey and soda.*] We'd all go to the dogs without you, Annie.

ANNIE

There's many ways o' going to the dogs, Mr. Tucker.

TUCKER

What do you mean by that, now? I suppose you think I'm hell bent to the dogs, what with this [*drinking*] and my fancy dress. Do you think I'm crazy?

ANNIE

One man's meat is another man's poison, Mr. Tucker.

TUCKER

Meaning that it wouldn't give you any pleasure to dress up as Pierrette and come with me to the party?

ANNIE

Mr. Tucker, I'd sooner be layin' in me casket.

TUCKER

Oh, that's an extreme point of view, Annie. Very extreme. It reminds me of Mrs. Tucker. That's just the way she feels. Now I don't see it at all. She's letting herself grow old ahead of time. She'd be ten years younger if she'd step out with me occasionally.

[ANNIE *nods.*]

You agree with me?

ANNIE

There's times that I think the one thing and again there's times that I think the other.

TUCKER

Oh, Annie, don't be so oracular.

ANNIE

Here's your shoe, sir. [*Rises.*]

TUCKER

Thank you. [*Puts it on.*]

ANNIE

What do you represent, sir, if it has a name?

TUCKER

I despair of explaining in few words. Why — a —

I'm Pierrot, Annie, the most charming, poetic, engaging figure in the whole realm of imagination. Wait till you see me with my face whitened. I suppose to you I'll only look like a sort of pathetic clown ——

ANNIE

Pathetic clown says it, sir.

TUCKER

Why, Annie, you absurd old woman.
[*She smiles grimly.*]
I know. You think I'm an absurd old man.

ANNIE

I'll be going.

TUCKER

No, Annie. Wait. You may be able to help me in a minute. [*Goes to door Right and stops.*] Annie, tell me honestly. I'm deeply interested in your opinion. What do you think of all this? [*Indicates costume.*]

ANNIE

Do you want the truth, Mr. Tucker?

TUCKER

Why — a — why — a — Yes. I guess so. Yes.

ANNIE

I think the world and all of you, Mr. Tucker, and I don't want you to harbor no hard feelings ag'in' me, but I don't hold with didoes in a gentleman who's entered into his fifties and has two ——

TUCKER

Two grandchildren. Count 'em. Hush. I admit them, but they're not my fault, Annie.

ANNIE

They're indirectly your fault, sir.

TUCKER

And don't talk about entering into the fifties, as though they were a vocation, like the priesthood. The Lord knows I didn't want to enter into them. Wait there.

[*Goes out Right.* ANNIE *tidies room. He whistles again rather feebly.*]

[*Off Right.*] What was it exactly you told me Mrs. Tucker said over the telephone this morning? When will she be home?

ANNIE

Day after to-morrow.

TUCKER

And the baby, my latest — a — descendant, was still doing well?

ANNIE

Mrs. Tucker said she never seen a finer infant. Them was her very words.

TUCKER

[*Thrusting in his whitened face.*] How's this?

ANNIE

Lord love us, Mr. Tucker, you put me in mind

of me brother Tom's boy in his last illness. He looked just that chalk-like, the poor young lad.

TUCKER

Annie, there's a touch of the macabre in your comparisons that puts me quite off my feed. Stay there a minute. [*Goes out, closing door.*]

[ANNIE *is busily engaged in tidying up down front when Center door opens and* ELEANOR TUCKER *comes in. She is an attractive woman of forty-nine, dressed for motoring.*]

ELEANOR

Well, Annie, here I am after all.

ANNIE

Well, for the love of Heaven! You've bad news, Mrs. Tucker. I know it. Them sudden changes. I had a dream last night. What is it? Which is it?

ELEANOR

There's no bad news, Annie. Both babies are well, except that —— Where's Mr. Tucker?

[ANNIE *lays hand on her mouth and looks at Right door.*]

Is he in there?

ANNIE

He is. Yes'm.

ELEANOR

Is he dining out? Isn't he late?

ANNIE

I couldn't say, Madam. You'll have to put it to him yourself.

ELEANOR

[*Taking off gloves and laying them on table.*] Why, Annie, what do you mean? Isn't he well?

ANNIE

He's as well as ever he was.

ELEANOR

Don't tell him. I'll sit here and surprise him. [*Sits left of table and looks over letters.* ANNIE *searches for dust.*] I hope things have gone smoothly while I've been away? [ANNIE *tosses her head and continues her search.*] Haven't they?

ANNIE

They've been goin' none too good.

ELEANOR

Do you know, Annie, it *would* be such a pleasant sensation to come home once, just once, without having you tell me something worrying.

ANNIE

I have me two eyes.

ELEANOR

Shut them occasionally, Annie. I do. I suppose it's Delia again?

ANNIE

[*Triumphantly discovering dust in picture frame up Right.*] That Delia Casey ain't worth her salt. [*Displaying duster with smudge of dust.*] Look at

this here, Mrs. Tucker. *Her* room to do, and you can't hardly step in it for the dirt.

ELEANOR

Oh, Annie, what nonsense. The room looks very well.

ANNIE

And the impudence of her! The other night we was havin' a little game of euchre, her and Mary Hanlon and Alice and me ——

ELEANOR

I don't want to hear anything about that little game of euchre. Certainly not now. And I don't want to make a change at present. Delia is always civil and obliging to Mr. Tucker and me.

ANNIE

Have it your own way, Madam. It's *your* house that's goin' to rack and ruin and *your* money that's bein' throwed away.

ELEANOR

Annie, you have somebody in mind to take Delia's place. I recognize the symptoms. Is it another of those McCabes?

ANNIE

No'm. Her name's Donovan. What's this it is they call her, now? Mona, Mona Donovan. She's just over a year. She's a greenhorn, you might say, but she's that full o' fun, and willin' and careful. Just one of the old-fashioned kind. *You* know. And quiet as a lamb.

ELEANOR

Mona Donovan. What a charming name! Are you sure she has no McCabe blood?

ANNIE

I won't deceive you, Madam. It's the truth her mother was a McCabe. Our two families lived side by side in the old country, in Tralee.

ELEANOR

I told you distinctly, Annie, after the departure of our last McCabe, that I would never have any one even remotely related to them in this house again. *You* were instrumental in inflicting four several McCabes upon me in the last six years. And each McCabe departed after a most dreadful row in which you and the McCabe of the moment were the chief protagonists. I don't know how your two families got along together in *Tralee*, but judging from what I've seen here, I should think Tralee must have been a most unquiet spot.

ANNIE

Of course, Mrs. Tucker, if I don't suit ——

ELEANOR

Now, Annie, don't use that absurd expression. I should as soon expect to hear Mr. Tucker talk about not suiting. Haven't you lived with us over forty years, in my mother's house and mine? I couldn't imagine life without you, but I do *wish* ——

ANNIE

Oh, your poor mamma! Your poor mamma

thought the world and all of *me*. 'Annie,' she sez to me one day, 'Annie,' she sez ——

ELEANOR

We're all devoted to you too, Annie.

ANNIE

There's others besides that knows me value. While you was away, on me Thursday afternoon, I run into Mrs. Judge Thorne on Grant Street. I was just passin' her by, you know, but she stops me and she sez to me, 'Annie,' she sez, 'I'm glad to see you lookin' so good.' An' I sez, 'Thank you, Mrs. Thorne,' I sez. And she sez, 'Well, Annie,' she sez, 'I hope Mrs. Tucker knows what a treasure she has in yourself' she sez. An' I sez, 'Mrs. Thorne,' I sez, 'I ain't heard no complaint, not in forty-three year,' I sez. An' she laughs and she sez, 'Well, Annie, there's only a few of us left,' she sez. An' I had to laugh. I thought it was so cute of her puttin' it like that. 'There's only a few of us left,' she sez.

ELEANOR

Mrs. Thorne can be very amusing. She must have been at her best that day. [*Looking at letter.*] That's all, Annie. I'll ring presently. And have some coffee and cold ham, something nice, in the dining-room in about half an hour. Miss Janet's coming in. She drove me down from the country.

ANNIE

Very well, Madam. [*Turning at door.*] But if it's not an intrusion, Mrs. Tucker, what brought

you down so sudden? Me heart's still goin' like a tack-hammer.

ELEANOR

There was so little room, and little Jackie hasn't been just right lately ——

ANNIE

I hope it ain't nothin' serious. I hear tell there's been a good bit of this here infantile paresis up Greendale way.

ELEANOR

Oh, Annie, you old raven. Run along with your infantile paresis.

[ANNIE *goes out Center, shaking her head.*]

[ELEANOR *reads letter. Door Right opens and* TUCKER *comes in fully dressed as* PIERROT.]

TUCKER

[*Singing as he enters.*] Au clair de la lune, mon ami Pierrot. [*Stopping short.*] Eleanor!

ELEANOR

[*Startled.*] Why, John! My poor old boy. You didn't expect *me.* I'll explain.

TUCKER

I'm afraid I can't kiss you.

ELEANOR

No, I'm afraid you can't.

TUCKER

Anything wrong?

ELEANOR

No, my dear. Nothing really wrong. Jackie hasn't been very well. And they got another nurse in. And as the baby's nurse is still there and they were rather crowded and Rob began to look restive, I concluded the mother-in-law's place was in her own home.

TUCKER

Quite right. [*Glances at letters with exaggerated unconsciousness. Pause.*]

ELEANOR

And now, mon ami Pierrot, aren't you going to explain anything to *me?*

TUCKER

What do you mean?

ELEANOR

What do I *mean? John!* Is this the way you usually dress in the evening when I'm away?

TUCKER

I suppose you think I look like a jackass. [*Lights cigarette.*]

ELEANOR

Not at all. I think a Pierrot costume is one of the few that an — an elderly gentleman may wear with propriety. Whose party is it?

TUCKER

The Bartons'. [*Drinks.*]

ELEANOR

Herbert and Mary Barton? Since when have they ——

TUCKER

No, it isn't Herbert and Mary at all. It's ——

ELEANOR

Not *Billy* and *Gladys* Barton?

TUCKER

Yes, it is.

ELEANOR

Oh, *John!*

TUCKER

Why shouldn't I go to a party at Billy and Gladys Barton's if I want to?

ELEANOR

If you *want* to.

TUCKER

Well, I do. It's Billy's birthday.

ELEANOR

Do you know what birthday?

TUCKER

No, and don't care.

ELEANOR

Are you going to give him a set of blocks or a toy pistol?

TUCKER

Don't be so nasty. Anyway, I don't think I'll go at all. I shouldn't have said I would if I'd thought you'd be back. I'd far rather stay home with you.

ELEANOR

Wouldn't I have a jolly evening if you stayed home from that party now! No, my dear, you must go, of course. But, let's see. Billy Barton is just twenty-six years old to-day. I remember so well the night he was born. Our Isabel was just fifteen months ——

TUCKER

What is it to *me how* old he is? He's old enough to give a party and I'm not too old to go to it. And they're nice enough to want me.

ELEANOR

Will any of our contemporaries be there?

TUCKER

I'm sure I haven't the remotest idea. I've no doubt they'll go if they're asked. They'd love to have *you*, you know, Eleanor, but I said you were away.

ELEANOR

I know they'd simply adore having me, but I don't believe I'll go, somehow. I'm too tired and I'm too — forgive me, John — too old.

TUCKER

You're not one minute too old, Eleanor. Look at me.

ELEANOR

I do, dear John, with admiration, and with other — mingled emotions. Oh, of course I know I'm younger than you are, but I could no more throw myself into that sort of thing — I was preordained to the rôle of grandmother, John. My children and their babies absolutely fill my horizon. Too much, perhaps. If caps and shawls weren't too conspicuous, I'd never wear anything else. My head and shoulders were made for them.

TUCKER

Don't sit there, looking so young and pretty, and talking such damned nonsense. Oh, Eleanor, if you'd only go to things like this with me, I'd have a so much better time.

ELEANOR

Now, do you know, I don't think you would at all.

TUCKER

Why not?

ELEANOR

Oh, well —— How soon are you starting?

TUCKER

Well — a — pretty soon.

ELEANOR

Let's sit here by the fire together till it's time for you to go.

[*They sit on sofa by fire and she takes his hand.*]

Have you ordered the car?

TUCKER

Well — a — no — a — I haven't. I'm not taking our car.

ELEANOR

Somebody stopping for you?

TUCKER

Yes.

ELEANOR

Who?

TUCKER

Somebody you don't like very much.

ELEANOR

[*Withdrawing her hand.*] Rita Francis?

TUCKER

Eleanor, if it weren't an insult to our intelligence, I'd say you were jealous of Rita.

ELEANOR

I don't think I'm jealous of Rita, John. It would seem as absurd as to be jealous of the new baby. But I *am* jealous *for* you, if you can understand what I mean. For your dignity. And I think for a man of your age to run after a child of hers ——

TUCKER

I don't run after her.

ELEANOR

She runs after you, then.

TUCKER

She does not.

ELEANOR

Well, I don't know *who* you run after, either of you, but you always seem to catch up with each other, somehow, and it does not look ——

TUCKER

Rita's a very fine girl, Eleanor.

ELEANOR

A 'brave little woman,' I suppose.

TUCKER

[*Rising, annoyed, and going Center.*] No, but she's a nice little mother. You ought to see her with that baby.

ELEANOR

She ought to be seen with that baby a great deal oftener than she is. No, John, the actual, physiological rôle of mother, I must grant her, I suppose, but nothing more. She's not a 'nice' little mother at all. There isn't a *soupçon* of Madonnahood about her. How often do you drop in to admire this tableau of happy maternity, by the way?

TUCKER

Oh, not very often. I've admired it a few times. Your prejudice against Rita Francis is one of the few small things about you, Eleanor.

ELEANOR

I freely admit that I don't care to see a young woman like Rita Francis making a fool of my nice old husband.

TUCKER

Let's just stop a minute and analyze this phrase that women are so fond of using. What do you mean, exactly, when you say that Rita makes a fool of me? She likes me to drop in for a cocktail occasionally. And she likes to dance with me. She says I have rhythm. Yes, she does. And she likes to play contract bridge with me. She says I'm the only older man she knows who has even a rudimentary knowledge of the bidding.

ELEANOR

You're the only older man she knows who wants to sit down for two hours every afternoon and play cards with a set of children. Fast and precocious children, it's true, but still children, compared to you.

TUCKER

I'm the only older man they'd have.

ELEANOR

Oh, John, Rita flatters you to death and encourages you to kick up your dear old heels in a group of people thirty years younger than you, where you don't belong at all. All people of our age, and all younger ones with a grain of sense, think you appear like an empty-headed old lunatic. And that's what I mean by saying that Rita makes a fool of you. Don't you see it, honestly?

TUCKER

No, I don't. Do you think she makes fun of me behind my back?

ELEANOR

I don't *know* that she does, but I should think nothing more likely.

TUCKER

I guess I'll wait downstairs for the car.

[*Goes sulkily to Center door and hesitates.*]

ELEANOR

Is she stopping for you by herself?

TUCKER

No.

ELEANOR

Oh, is Ben Francis going too? That *does* surprise me. What costume ——

TUCKER

Of course Ben's not going. A grouch like Ben. He's too self-conscious.

ELEANOR

To enjoy dressing up. Well, you're not that, my dear.

TUCKER

The truth is there's a little group of us going together ——

ELEANOR

And Rita's Columbine.

TUCKER

She is.

ELEANOR

She'll look lovely.

TUCKER

She will.

ELEANOR

And then there'll be Harlequin. Who's he?

TUCKER

[*Smiling sheepishly at her.*] You'll laugh.

ELEANOR

[*Smiling back.*] Or cry. Who?

TUCKER

Harry O'Day.

ELEANOR

Harry *O'Day?* [*Rises and stands by fire.*] Agnes O'Day's boy? Oh, *John!* Why, he's still at school.

TUCKER

He's not. He's at college. At least he went to Princeton last year. He was dropped at Christmas, so he's home now.

ELEANOR

Well, I dare say I should be grateful that *he's* to be Harlequin and not you. But, oh, *John!* He's such a child. I suppose Rita's baby *was* too young for the part.

[*He goes out slamming door, but immediately opens it and comes in.*]

TUCKER

Janet's just coming in.

ELEANOR

Well, what if she is? [*Her face lights up.*] Oh, John, listen. You love Janet, don't you, and you know that she loves you?

TUCKER

No man ever had a better niece. *We* understand each other. She'd be at this party to-night if it wasn't for her damned mourning.

ELEANOR

Listen to me. Be going down as she comes in. Then come right back to that door and frankly *listen*. She'll think you're gone. I believe I can let you hear her candid opinion of what we've been talking about.

TUCKER

You've cooked this up.

ELEANOR

Dear John, I haven't. I swear it! I thought of it for the first time this instant. Stand behind the portières where you can watch my face and see that I don't deceive you. Of course it may not work.

TUCKER

I don't like to. It seems so tricky. Just what a woman would think of.

ELEANOR

Please. She'll forgive you. It's so seldom one can learn what people really think.

TUCKER

It's so seldom one wants to.

[JANET WILLIAMS *comes in Center. She is a charming girl of twenty-two, dressed in black.*]

JANET

[*Screams.*] Good gracious! Oh, Uncle John. I forgot. Of course he's going to the Bartons'.

TUCKER

I wish you were coming with me.

ELEANOR

What do you think of him?

JANET

He's — he's — wonderful. What a lovely costume! Aunt Eleanor, I've just been talking to Rob on the telephone and they think Jackie has whooping cough.

ELEANOR

Oh, dear! I'm sorry. But still ——

[TUCKER *edges towards door.*]

You're not afraid of whooping cough, John? Anyway, we can't carry it.

TUCKER

I'm not thinking of myself.

ELEANOR

You altruistic old dear. You're thinking of Harry O'Day and the other children at the party. Don't worry. It's all right.

[*He scowls at them and opens door.*]

JANET

Good-night, Uncle John. Have a good time.

TUCKER

Good-bye. [*Goes out, closing door.*]

JANET

What a dear he is! Don't *you* think he's a dear, Aunt Eleanor?

ELEANOR

I *know* he is. Now sit down, my child. There'll be some supper presently. Smoke a cigarette.

[JANET *smiles as she lights it.*]

What are you smiling at?

JANET

Oh —— Nothing.

ELEANOR

Yes, you are. What?

JANET

I'm smiling at —— I wonder if I dare tell you?

ELEANOR

I think you may.

JANET

I'm smiling at the whole idea of — of dear old Uncle John. [PIERROT'S *hand is seen at portière.*]

ELEANOR

What do you mean, exactly?

JANET

You don't get me at all?

ELEANOR

Well — a —— Perhaps I may have a faraway inkling of what you're driving at, but —— You'll have to be more explicit, Janet. At least if it's something you want to discuss with me.

JANET

I'm not sure it *is* a thing that I want to discuss with you.

ELEANOR

But it sounds very interesting. Let me see. I gather it has something to do with your Uncle John?

JANET

It has everything to do with Uncle John.

ELEANOR

Really? What is it?

JANET

Has it never occurred to you —— Oh, Aunt Eleanor, just now — when he went off to that party — that party of young people — at the

Bartons' — dressed up as Pierrot —— Dear old thing —— Oh, I love him. I love him dearly. But —— I sort of wish he wouldn't.

ELEANOR

Why not?

JANET

Don't you really understand what I mean?

ELEANOR

Oh, yes, I do, partly understand. But I don't quite trust my own prejudices. You see, my dear, *I'm* perfectly willing to grow old. [*Thoughtfully.*] I sometimes wonder if I haven't made a mistake. I know I don't look old, and I'm younger than he is, of course. Perhaps your Uncle John is the wiser of the two. I *could* still dance and learn to play contract and whoop it up generally with you children ——

JANET

Oh, no, no, *no*, Aunt Eleanor. [*Goes over and kisses her.*] I wouldn't have you for anything. You're just right as you are. You understand exactly how much the generations ought to overlap. And dear Uncle John ——

ELEANOR

Yes? Dear Uncle John ——?

JANET

Dear Uncle John doesn't.

ELEANOR

Why, Janet, you amaze me. You really do.

You and Uncle John are such friends. You seem just the same age to me.

JANET

We're the best friends in the world. I adore him. And that's just why — I can't bear — I simply hate to see him cheapening himself. A man of his brain and his ability.

ELEANOR

How does he cheapen himself?

JANET

I remember, years ago, hearing old Aunt Mary Russell say of a somewhat similar case, 'If there's one thing that turns my stomach, it's an old dog that thinks he's a puppy still.' [PIERROT'S *face is seen between portières.*]

ELEANOR

And, in your opinion, Uncle John thinks he's a puppy still?

JANET

Well, that more or less describes it. And he's getting to be a joke. And I don't like it one bit. [*Sits as before.*]

ELEANOR

To whom, pray, is your Uncle John becoming a joke?

JANET

Oh, Aunt Eleanor, it isn't a bit like *that.* I thought you'd understand me. But if any person

of one generation tries to live altogether among the people of a younger generation, and on the terms of the younger generation, why — don't you see — they can't help being, well — sort of — well — almost quaint and ridiculous. Two different generations simply do *not* have the same pace, and the alien gets all out of step in the different generation. And you know there's nothing funnier than a person out of step. Do you see at all what I mean?

ELEANOR

Yes, I think I do.

JANET

Well, now, to give an example. Last Saturday afternoon I stopped in at Rita's. Very late. [PIERROT'S *hand is seen at portières.*] There were a lot of people there. Young people, you know. It had rained all day and they'd been playing contract and dancing too. There was a piano going and a ukulele, and, well — it was a very, *very* gay scene.

ELEANOR

I don't doubt it.

JANET

And Uncle John —— But perhaps I shouldn't tell you this.

ELEANOR

Go on, my dear. I know Uncle John better than you do.

JANET

Well, Uncle John was just leaving when I arrived.

Rita was in a gale. She'd won forty-two dollars from him at contract, and the way she spoke of his game sort of annoyed me to begin with. And you know Rita's terribly funny.

ELEANOR

She never amused me particularly.

JANET

You've never seen her at her best. Oh, she *is* funny. And the most marvelous mimic. And, you know, she adores Uncle John.

ELEANOR

Does she?

JANET

Oh, Aunt Eleanor, not *that* way. She adores him the way I adore him. The way we all do. Why, she'd no more think of him that way than I would of father. [PIERROT's *face is seen between portières.*] To her he's just a kind old man, whom she likes to have — well — hanging round, when she's nothing more enthralling on hand.

ELEANOR

Not very dignified for Uncle John, is it?

JANET

No, I can't say that it is. And that's what I —— But this is what I started to tell you. It seems he'd been dancing with Rita. And you know he does dance well, in that old-fashioned way. He *did* use to dance well, didn't he?

ELEANOR

He danced divinely.

JANET

I'm sure he did. Well, the men who danced divinely thirty years ago simply don't dance divinely any more. They don't seem to be able to get away from the 'Blue Danube.' Why, I've heard people of my age say that they couldn't dance with any satisfaction to themselves when older people were dancing on the same floor. The lack of rhythm, or something, put them altogether off.

ELEANOR

Poor sensitive young things!

JANET

Of course, it isn't the older people's fault exactly ——

ELEANOR

No, not exactly.

JANET

But if they will persist in dancing ——

ELEANOR

Don't tell me that Rita found fault with your Uncle John's rhythm!

JANET

Found fault with *his rhythm!* She gave an imitation of him dancing. Of course she'd had one or two cocktails, and I was furious, simply *furious*,

at first, but, oh, Aunt Eleanor, it was the funniest thing you ever saw in your life. [*Laughing.*] Everybody howled ——

TUCKER

[*In Center doorway.*] Did *you* howl, Janet, with the rest of the pack? Young she wolf!

JANET

[*Starting up.*] Oh, Uncle *John!* I thought you'd gone.

TUCKER

Well, I hadn't. I'm not going. I'm never going anywhere. [*Shakes his head reproachfully.*] Mine own familiar niece. [*Comes down Center and pours drink.*]

JANET

Uncle John, you were listening all that time?
[*He nods.*]
Aunt Eleanor, did you know it?

ELEANOR

I planned it, Janet. On the spur of the moment. I wanted him to know. It was the best way ——

JANET

Well, I don't remember just what I said, but I won't retract a single word. I think I've had very unfair treatment, and any apologies to be offered are due to me.

ELEANOR

[*Going to her.*] They are, dear Janet. Forgive

me. Forgive us both. But your fair affectionate point of view was just what I wanted him to hear.

TUCKER

Well, I certainly heard an earful. I shan't digest it for years, if ever. And so much worldly wisdom in one so young. Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings. [*Drinks.*]

JANET

You take it standing up, Uncle John. I *am* sorry, oh, I am. They say listeners never hear good of themselves, but I think you heard a good deal. At least you know we all love you, even if ——

TUCKER

Even if I *am* a pathetic old back number, who clings to youth and young people because he loves them and doesn't feel a day older than they do and doesn't — doesn't realize he's only in the way.

JANET

[*Going to him and laying her hand on his shoulder.*] You don't think that, Uncle John.

TUCKER

Ah, Janet, forget it. I'm only talking. It's high time the old fool saw himself as others see him. [*Drains glass.*]

ELEANOR

John, don't drink like that. Are you crazy?

TUCKER

It's an anodyne, my dear. After the fact. Don't

you two surgeons, by the way, think it's rather brutal to perform a major operation without giving even a local anæsthetic?

JANET

Oh, I've hurt him. I've hurt him terribly. And I wouldn't for the world. I'd have bitten my tongue out first.

TUCKER

Don't you fash yourself, my dear. I'll survive. My head is bloody but unbowed. Or bowed ever so little. But it *was* a major operation, all the same. It cut the last spark of youth out of me like a diseased appendix.

JANET

Oh, Uncle John, don't say that. Don't!

TUCKER

It's a fact. [*Putting his hand up.*] What's this damned thing on my head? [*Flings peaked hat across room.*] That's that. And now all this mess is coming off. [*Rubbing his face and going Right.*]

JANET

Aunt Eleanor, stop him.

ELEANOR

[*Rising and seizing his arms.*] You've got to go through with this party to-night, John.

TUCKER

Party be damned! I shan't budge a step. You

ought to have thought of that before. *Ma chandelle est morte, je n'ai plus de feu.*

ELEANOR

You have enough to light you through this one evening. It would be an outrage to fail them now. And they'll be here any minute.

JANET

Who?

ELEANOR

Rita and Harry O'Day. They're going with him as Columbine and Harlequin.

JANET

Oh, great Heavens! Rita! I'd forgotten. How could I —— Oh, it seems so treacherous. [*Sinks into chair and begins to cry.*] Oh, Uncle John, you've got to go. You've simply got to. She might think ——

TUCKER

Was that imitation of me so very damned funny?

JANET

Yes, it was. Very d-damned funny. B-but she didn't mean a thing by it. She loves you, Uncle John.

TUCKER

Oh, she does, does she? And she did say I had rhythm. She did.

ELEANOR

If she doesn't love you, she'll be the first human being who ever knew you that didn't.

TUCKER

That's very handsome of you, Eleanor, but I won't be comforted. My spirit's broken. Rita's a minx. And Janet's another minx. The whole younger generation is a generation of vipers. I won't go to the party. [*Sits Left of table.*]

ELEANOR

But Harry and Rita?

TUCKER

Harry and Rita can go straight ——

ELEANOR

John!

TUCKER

Straight to the party without me.

JANET

Oh, Uncle John, you make me so unhappy.

TUCKER

What have you made me? [*Half smiles.*] Here's one old dog that's done with puppyhood forever.

ELEANOR

Go with the puppies to-night, John, and behave as a nice, respectable, elderly dog should, and take my blessing with you.

[*Young laughter is heard outside Center door.*]

TUCKER

[*Melodramatically.*] The voice of vanished youth at the door.

HARRY *and* RITA

[*Outside singing:*]

Au clair de la lune
S'en va Harlequin:
Il frappe chez la brune,
Ne frappe pas en vain,
Qui frappe de la sorte:
Il fit a son tour:
Ouvre moi ta porte,
Pour le Dieu d'Amour.

[*On the next to last line they throw open the door and appear on the threshold.* RITA *is a bewitching Columbine and* HARRY *is a lithe and handsome, but slightly sheepish Harlequin. They bow low, then step lightly over and seize* TUCKER *by either arm.*]

RITA

Good-evening, everybody. Dear Mrs. Tucker, may we take him right away? We're so late.

[*They force him gently up from chair and stand each holding an arm.*]

ELEANOR

You may indeed, the sooner the better.

RITA

You're a lamb to let him come with us. And isn't he a lamb to do it? I wish you and Jane were coming too.

JANET

You look too lovely, Rita. [*Examines her dress.*]

RITA

Buck up, Pierrot. Can't you say something civil?

TUCKER

You won't like what I'm going to say.

HARRY

He's going to say I look like a doggone fool. And so I do.

ELEANOR

Why, Harry, you're perfect. The very spirit of Harlequin. When you get to the party, with everybody in costume, you'll forget to be self-conscious.

HARRY

Well, let's beat it, then, right off, for I feel an awful ass now.

ELEANOR

Wait. Come over here, Janet, and look at them. Did you ever see a more effective group?

JANET

[*Right.*] Never. They look like a Dresden china set.

TUCKER

Dresden china be blowed. I'm going to bust the set.

[*Disengages himself from them and comes Center.*]

RITA

What do you mean by that?

TUCKER

I mean I'm not going, Rita. I'm sorry, but I just can't.

ELEANOR

Don't listen to him, Rita.

JANET

He doesn't mean it.

RITA

I don't care what he means. I only know he shan't back out and leave us high and dry at the last moment. You wouldn't do that, old scout, would you?

TUCKER

Old scout, nothing! Yes, I would.

RITA

What's got into him, Mrs. Tucker?

TUCKER

Old age has got into me, Rita. It's gnawing at every one of my four hundred and seventy-two bones. If that's the correct number.

RITA

Well, we're going to shake it out of the whole four hundred and seventy-two to-night. [*To* ELEANOR.] Do you want him to go?

ELEANOR

He's got to go.

RITA

That's all I want to know. I never try to make a man do anything his wife doesn't approve.

HARRY

[*Aside to* JANET.] Not when his wife's present.

RITA

What's that?

HARRY

Nothing. I was just telling Janet how uncomfortable I am in this confounded get-up

RITA

Shut up, you little runt. I heard you. You're simply crazy about yourself. And no wonder. There's no other boy in town who could wear that Harlequin dress and not look a gawk. Now, just listen to me, Mr. John Christopher Tucker, you're coming with us to-night.

TUCKER

Oh, no, Rita, no. I'm too old.

RITA

Old? Rubbish! Be old to-morrow if you choose, but be young to-night. I'll feel old myself to-morrow, after the night that this is going to be. We're going first to the Millers', for a cocktail, and perhaps a rubber of contract. And then — on to the Bartons'. It's going to be a knock-out. The party's taken on superb dimensions. Mendel's orchestra is coming. Yes, actually. You and I are

going to show them how to dance the Jungle Jerk and the Kaffir Crawl. The Black Bottom's as quaint as the minuet. Don't be worried, Mrs. Tucker. They're perfectly innocent. It's just the names. And I made them up myself.

TUCKER

Rita, no.

RITA

John Christopher, yes. Chuck this rot about age. All our lot adore you, and couldn't have the party without you. There'll be none of your vintage there to cramp your style. Just the boys and girls who love you and to whose pleasure you add more than you'll ever know. This one night, anyway. Come. Where's his hat?

HARRY

[*Picking it up and clapping it on his head.*] Here you are, Pierrot.

TUCKER

What do you think, Eleanor?

ELEANOR

Go, go, my dear boy. Of course, go.

JANET

Quick, Uncle John.

TUCKER

We're off. One night only. The last fling of youth.

[*Between* RITA *and* HARRY, *and holding a*

hand of each, he goes swiftly to Center door. Tableau, as THE THREE *stand, with ankles crossed and holding one hand in air.*]

ALL THREE

Au clair de la lune, mon ami Pierrot ——

[*Turn and go swiftly out. As* ELEANOR *and* JANET *face each other with a smile, three successive whoops are heard outside from* HARRY, RITA, *and* TUCKER.]

JANET

What on earth ——

ANNIE

[*Coming in Center.*] Such actions have never come to me notice in all me born days. Slid down the bannisters. The whole three of them. First the O'Day boy, then her, and then him. I thought me eyes had gone back on me.

ELEANOR

I'm glad they did, Annie. We'll be right down.

[ANNIE *takes up tray with whiskey and soda.*]

JANET

Aunt Eleanor, do you think he really means ——

ELEANOR

I rather think he does, dear. And — anyway —— Who knows but the world will end to-night!

[*Holds up finger, as the first bars of Mon Ami Pierrot are heard under the windows. All three women stand listening.*]

CURTAIN

MARGARET IN NAXOS

Play in One Act

CHARACTERS

Margaret Cameron
Louise Payson
Hector Cameron

MARGARET IN NAXOS

The action takes place in MRS. CAMERON'S *salon in a small Swiss hotel. The room is small but comfortable and is furnished with noticeable simplicity. It contains practically no articles such as an intelligent woman might be expected to accumulate during a prolonged residence abroad. Door Center, opening into passage. Door Left, opening into bedroom. Two windows Right, with small fireplace between them. Books very much in evidence. Photograph of a man conspicuous on small desk near up window. Table Center.*

When curtain rises, MARGARET CAMERON *is sitting Left of table,* LOUISE PAYSON *at Right.* MARGARET *is a placid and agreeable-looking woman of forty-six, very plainly dressed.* LOUISE *is a pretty woman of forty-four, elaborately dressed for motoring.*

LOUISE

[*Rising.*] And now, my dear, I really *must* go. Heavens! [*Looking at watch.*] I've been here an hour and a half. The Carringtons will think I'm lost.

MARGARET

I wish you wouldn't. You've done me good, Louise. I won't attempt to say how much.

LOUISE

Darling! How sweet of you to say that.

MARGARET

Do sit down.

LOUISE

Well, I *will* smoke this one more cigarette, perhaps. But I shouldn't. [*Lights it.*] Jim Carrington is a perfect tyrant about the car. You've done *me* good, Margaret. You always did. Do you remember that dreadful time, years ago, when I was just on the verge, the *very verge*, of divorcing Bertie ——

MARGARET

Which dreadful time?

LOUISE

Margaret, how *can* you? Why I *think* it was the time ——

MARGARET

Never mind, dear. There was *never* a time when I had any misgivings, any *serious* misgivings about you and Bertie.

LOUISE

I assure you solemnly I *very*, *very* nearly left him that other time, at Palm Beach. And I think the only thing that saved him was that wise, wise letter from you.

MARGARET

At any rate, you *haven't* left him, and you've had a pretty successful life together. And I should say you were a happy pair. A *reasonably* happy pair.

LOUISE

Well, I think you *may* say that. We certainly

are rather reasonable. We interfere with each other as little as possible. We go our own roads, you might say, and yet we keep in the *same* road, as it were.

MARGARET

And you haven't threatened to leave him for ——

LOUISE

As a matter of fact, it *wasn't* so long ago. It was just before I sailed with the Carringtons. But I wrote him the sweetest letter from the steamer, and told him that I positively wouldn't even *mention* divorce again until after Sylvia comes out this winter.

MARGARET

Oh, Louise, you goose!

LOUISE

It means nothing, really. We understand each other. Oh, we know there'll always be some rocks ahead, but we'll scramble over them somehow. Don't worry about us, dear.

MARGARET

I won't.

LOUISE

But this is more serious. When am I going to see you again?

MARGARET

Some day soon, I hope.

LOUISE

You don't hope anything of the sort.

MARGARET

Why do you say that?

LOUISE

Because you don't. And in all this talk we've had, you've held yourself just as remote and intangible as —— I might just as well have been trying to approach you through a spiritualistic 'control.'

MARGARET

What nonsense! My dear Louise, I've enjoyed our talk this morning more than anything that has happened to me for years. I mean it literally — for years. Haven't you told me about your children and about everybody at home and ——

LOUISE

Yes. You know as much about every adenoid and tonsil in our family as I do myself. And there's not one morsel of gossip I haven't retailed. But what have you told me about yourself? Nothing.

MARGARET

I've told you everything there is to tell.

LOUISE

You've told me everything you're *going* to tell, you mean.

MARGARET

I've told you that I've lived here quietly in this lovely place, for three years ——

LOUISE

But how *can* you?

MARGARET

[*Rising and going to down stage window.*] Look at this view.

LOUISE

I will *not* look at that view. I hate the word. Switzerland is nothing but one monstrous view. It's frightfully inartistic. I'll be glad to be out of it on Thursday. And the best views, apparently, always spread themselves just back of the nape of my neck while we're motoring. At least so Jim Carrington says. I gave up looking at them the second day.

MARGARET

Isn't it a pity to motor through Europe if you don't like scenery?

LOUISE

I didn't take this motor trip for the scenery, my dear. I took it to get *away* from adenoids and tonsils and servants and Bertie. And there was also a drive for Saint John's Hospital that I wanted to miss.

[*Rises and looks around room. The photograph on desk arrests her attention. After near-sighted attempt to recognize it, she opens lorgnon and inspects it furtively.*]

MARGARET

What *do* you like about the trip?

LOUISE

Lots of things. I like the casinos everywhere, and the wines. And I adore the gambling and the dancing. And then I look forward to Paris and clothes. And then you know I always revel in the smuggling when we land. We meet people we know everywhere, and I dance the Black Bottom every night. A modified version, of course.

[*Moves about room looking at things.*]

MARGARET

Oh, Louise! At your age.

LOUISE

I have no age. Look at these hips. Would you think I was over thirty?

MARGARET

Not a day.

LOUISE

I really *am* rather wonderful. New people always think I'm that. I can tell you I keep Sylvia's début mighty dark when some of these sinuous boys with funny little mustaches ask me for the Black Bottom.

MARGARET

Don't say that again.

LOUISE

I won't. It isn't a pretty name. Jim Carrington was very coarse about it last night.

MARGARET

The name invites coarseness.

LOUISE

But you ought to see me do it.

[*She walks deliberately to desk and examines photograph, then looks at Margaret, who returns the look silently.*]

[*Sweeping room with lorgnon.*] I seem to miss —— Where are all your *things?* The room's so impersonal, except for the books. And they're so *deep.* [*Poking them about.*] Margaret, I hope you're not turning into a thinker.

MARGARET

I rather hope I am.

LOUISE

The worst thing you could possibly do. You always used to be picking up the loveliest things in Europe. What have you *done* with them?

MARGARET

I've sold some, and given some away, and some are stored.

LOUISE

Why?

MARGARET

They don't interest me any more.

LOUISE

[*After opening her mouth to speak and thinking better of it.*] I can't bear it. I *simply* can't *bear* it.

MARGARET

What can't you bear?

LOUISE

To have you lead this life, this dreadful, lonely exile, away from all your friends, all the people that love you. It's too *terrible.* When I think of you actually living in this dead and buried Swiss village for *three years*, it makes me so wild I feel as though I'd burst. You have no business to do it. And never writing to anybody.

MARGARET

I have nothing to say.

LOUISE

But why stick in this perfectly poisonous hole?

MARGARET

Don't talk such nonsense. It's a heavenly place. And I have associations with it. I never expect to 'live,' really, anywhere else.

LOUISE

Have you lived here ever since —— I mean, you say it's three years?

MARGARET

Yes.

LOUISE

But in the old days you used to fly all over the continent, Spain, Russia, Greece, everywhere. I don't see how you can be so stationary now.

MARGARET

Perhaps my wings are broken.

LOUISE

Margaret! Margaret, tell me one thing. And forgive my asking it. I know I'm a frivolous creature, fundamentally, incurably frivolous, and believe me or not, my dear, it's a very sensible thing to be in such a dreadful world as this. But, though I *am* frivolous, and always intend to be, I *am* also capable of caring quite a lot about a few people. Very few, darling, but you happen to be one. Now don't be absurd and sensitive, but — well — a —— Tell me about the money question. Are you perfectly comfortable? You know I'd simply love ——

MARGARET

[*Kissing her.*] Thank you, dearest Louise. I'd tell *you* if I needed 'help.' But, fortunately, I don't. I have plenty for every reasonable need.

LOUISE

Oh, 'reasonable needs'! Who cares about *reasonable* needs? Have you enough for any nice *un*reasonable needs? That's what *I* mean.

MARGARET

Please don't speak of it again, Louise. I have everything I want.

LOUISE

[*Walks to window and turns.*] Now what can a

fellow do about such a person as you? You obstinate, intangible sphinx! Margaret, come for a motor trip with me. Just for two weeks. I'd shake the Carringtons like that, if you would.

MARGARET

My dear, I won't. Don't suggest it.

LOUISE

But it would take you out of yourself. This lonely life is so narrowing. It's destroying your sense of humor. And you used to have the most heavenly one. Do come. We could go anywhere, and we'd have such loads of fun in the evenings.

MARGARET

Dancing the Black Bottom.

LOUISE

My dear, it would be the making of you.

MARGARET

You've restored my sense of humor to-day. I think I *was* losing it. But I wish you wouldn't harp upon my loneliness. Haven't I told you ——

LOUISE

Yes, and don't tell me again about that English clergyman and his family, who come here every summer. I know exactly what they're like, and I couldn't hate them any worse, if I knew them personally. You won't come with me?

MARGARET

Oh, Louise, no.

LOUISE

Well, then, I'm going. [*Kissing her.*] You stubborn thing, how *can* you let me leave so unsatisfied, when you know perfectly well —— However, there's no use prolonging it.

[*They go to Center door.*]

Good-bye. At least you *will* write?

MARGARET

I'm coming down with you.

LOUISE

No. Don't. Wave to me from the balcony. That will give you another chance to look at your beastly view.

MARGARET

Good-bye.

[LOUISE *goes out, closing door after her.* MARGARET *stands a moment, half smiling, then goes to window. The door opens and* LOUISE *thrusts her head in.*]

LOUISE

I've just this moment thought. Margaret, let me send you a Chow.

MARGARET

A *what?*

LOUISE

A Chow dog, like my Chinky.

MARGARET

What for?

LOUISE

Why, to cuddle and play with and talk to. The thought of your loneliness simply kills me. You could build yourself a new life round a Chow.

MARGARET

Indeed I couldn't. Don't you dare send me a Chow.

LOUISE

A Pom, then, or a Dachshund?

MARGARET

Thank you, no. Why not a parrot?

LOUISE

That wouldn't be bad. But of course you can't cuddle a parrot.

MARGARET

I should say I *couldn't* cuddle a parrot. I have no desire to cuddle anything. My dear Louise, please try to believe me when I tell you that what you call my loneliness doesn't oppress me. And if it did, I could never assuage it by resorting to Noah's Ark. I don't want a dog nor a cat, nor an ox nor an ass, nor an elephant nor a duck-billed platypus. Not one of them would give me any comfort whatever.

LOUISE

You are inscrutable. Simply inscrutable. Goodbye, Woman of Bronze.

[*She disappears, closing door again.* MAR-

GARET *goes to desk, picks up photograph, looks at it, shakes her head, then, clasping it to her heart, stands in window, looking down into street. Pause. Center door opens and* LOUISE *comes in, closing it after her.*]

LOUISE

I don't care. I'm going to speak. I will *not* be such a coward.

[MARGARET *hesitates what to do with picture, which* LOUISE *sees in her arms.*]

MARGARET

What do you mean?

LOUISE

You know what I mean. Margaret, where is he? [*Pointing at picture.*]

[MARGARET *looks at picture, then at* LOUISE, *then stands picture on desk.*]

MARGARET

You're asking me where Hector is?

LOUISE

Yes. Where?

MARGARET

I don't know.

LOUISE

You don't *know?*

[MARGARET *shakes her head.*]

Darling, you *must* understand that this isn't just curiosity.

MARGARET

What is it?

LOUISE

Well, of course, there *is* curiosity mixed up with it, but it isn't just *vulgar* curiosity. It's far more, affection for you, and interest, and the associations of a lifetime. If you don't understand the way I feel, I'll go without another word. [*Turns to door.*]

MARGARET

Come back, Louise.

[*She returns and they stand either side of table.*]

I *do* understand. I'll answer any question you care to ask me. I *think* I will. But it's a very — a — very — a — difficult for me. I've never mentioned Hector to any human being, since he went away.

LOUISE

Margaret, *darling!* You've never mentioned his name at *all?*

MARGARET

Never.

LOUISE

And you've no idea at *all* where he is?

MARGARET

No idea at all.

LOUISE

Has he never written?

MARGARET

Once. Just after he went away, telling me —— I never answered it.

LOUISE

And how long —— I mean when —— I mean when did it — did it happen?

MARGARET

He left me in this room, three years and three months ago, day before yesterday.

LOUISE

And he's with that — with that woman still?

MARGARET

So far as I know.

LOUISE

Did you know her?

MARGARET

Yes. Slightly.

LOUISE

What was she —— What was her name?

MARGARET

Eckhardt. Bertha Eckhardt. Mrs. Lester Eckhardt.

LOUISE

Where from?

MARGARET

St. Louis.

LOUISE

What was she —— Don't tell me if you don't feel like it —— But what *was* she like?

MARGARET

She was very pretty. Awfully pretty. About thirty-five, I should say. And dressed exquisitely, always. Hector admired her taste. He noticed things like that, you remember.

LOUISE

Do I remember!

MARGARET

I used to dress beautifully myself, once. When it was worth my while.

[LOUISE *walks to mantel, and touches her eyes with her handkerchief.* MARGARET *sits Left of table and leans her elbows on it.*]

LOUISE

I'll break down in a minute if you say another thing like that. Of course she was rich.

MARGARET

Frightfully rich. So was Mr. Eckhardt. She had been a great heiress.

LOUISE

And Hector's been wallowing in the lap of luxury ever since he — ever since?

MARGARET

I suppose so.

LOUISE

Has she children?

MARGARET

Two, I think.

LOUISE

Didn't her husband divorce her?

MARGARET

I don't know. Really. Oh, I could have found out. The thing was mentioned in the papers. But I couldn't read about it. I just *couldn't read* about it. *You* think that's unnatural, of course.

LOUISE

Not in your case, dear. But it would certainly be unnatural in my case. So unnatural that it couldn't happen.

MARGARET

So I don't know whether she's divorced or not. Hector has never asked *me* for one.

LOUISE

Would you consent?

MARGARET

Probably.

LOUISE

[*Coming to sit opposite her at table.*] Margaret, did he just go off without a word? Without telling you ——

MARGARET

Without a word. I got his letter the next day. Oh, Hector didn't like to hurt people. He felt that a regular parting scene would be too painful.

LOUISE

For himself.

MARGARET

Yes. Largely for himself. But for me, too. Oh, I admit that he was determined to make his life as easy and agreeable as possible. But never forget, Louise, how agreeable he made *my* life for eighteen years. *I* never can. I wish I could sometimes.

LOUISE

Oh, my *dear!* And after eighteen years! How *could* he! And you did *everything* for him.

MARGARET

A good deal. But then, think what he did for me.

LOUISE

What?

MARGARET

He made every day of our life together as happy and cheerful and amusing and interesting as it could possibly be made. No woman ever had a happier life. And he never complained and found fault, as other men seem to do. He was very proud of his disposition. He often said to me, 'Well, Margaret, I may be worthless, and of course I know I don't amount to a row of pins, but confess that I'm easy to live with, and that we've had fun to-

gether, always.' He hated arguments and rows. You know we never had a quarrel.

LOUISE

You *should* have. Quarrels are great safety valves for married people.

MARGARET

Perhaps.

LOUISE

Well, you certainly were an angel about his 'affairs.' Didn't they worry you?

MARGARET

Not much. I knew they were so innocent. They never lasted a month. He told me all about them and I always had to rescue him in the end. I understood him. I *thought* I understood him.

LOUISE

Of course, then, you never worried about his affair with me?

MARGARET

Not for a second.

LOUISE

I really ought to be furious at that. But I'm not. You knew I wasn't capable of real treachery.

MARGARET

I thought neither of you was.

LOUISE

And so you last saw him ——

MARGARET

In this very room. I was sitting just where I am now. It was an afternoon in May and I was studying my German lesson, all involved in German verbs. He came in at that door and said he was going over to the Eckhardts' chalet for tea. He wanted me to come. The Eckhardts had a chalet about a mile away. The only comfortable chalet I ever saw. I said I wouldn't go, and he came over here and kissed me. Then he stood in that door, and waved his hat to me, closed the door after him, and I never saw him again.

[*Pause. A knock at the door.*]

MARGARET

Entrez.

HECTOR

[*Chanting, as he opens door.*] *Cette voix si bien aimée.* [*He is an extremely attractive man of fifty, and stands in doorway, flourishing hat over his head and carrying large portmanteau.*] Oh, I beg your pardon. I didn't know that any one else —— Why, *Louise Payson!* What luck! I didn't recognize you. [*Closes door behind him, tosses hat into chair, and sets down portmanteau.*]

[*The two women stare at him silently.* LOUISE *rises.*]

Isn't it luck, though, Margaret, you must admit, to find you two dear women together? After all the years that the locust hath eaten.

LOUISE

[*Looking at ceiling.*] *Grâce de Dieu!*

HECTOR

[*Looking up too.*] What are you looking up there for?

LOUISE

A thunderbolt.

HECTOR

For me, of course. Louise! You *are* a dear. You always were and you always will be. Didn't I always say so, Margaret? [*Extends hand to* LOUISE.]

LOUISE

[*Limply taking it.*] Words fail me.

HECTOR

For once. [*Turns to* MARGARET, *takes step towards her and holds out both hands.*] Margaret!

[*She looks straight at him without changing her position.*]

You're not going to *sulk?* You never used to. You were always the most understanding, tolerant, broad-minded woman. I've been away too long. Isn't it too bad of her, Louise, when I've come home for good? *For good.* I swear it! No more adventures for young Hector Cameron, Ph.E., Philanderer Emeritus. Margaret, *please* don't transfix me with such an eye. If you'll only take this situation with the proper lightness of touch, and meet me halfway, we're going to be happier than we ever were before. And that's going some.

MARGARET

Louise ——

LOUISE

Yes, dear? Shall I go? Shall I stay? What do you want me to do? If you need me I shan't budge. The Carringtons can sit in that car and wait until they turn into pillars of salt.

MARGARET

No, dear. You'd better go. Hector and I are going to have a talk. We'll manage better alone. [*Rises.*]

LOUISE

Very well. [*Kissing her.*] But this time, you've *got* to write to me. Don't dare to lose that address.

[HECTOR *follows her to door.*]

Look at that bag! I never *heard* —— Positively, Hector Cameron, such colossal nerve as yours almost inspires respect. It's so magnificent, it ought to be commemorated in some way. A tablet of bronze. No. A tablet of brass. [*Going out.*] Don't come down.

HECTOR

[*Outside door.*] I won't. Good-bye, Louise. So glad to have seen you. Best to Bertie. That hat's a dream, and you're prettier than ever. [*Comes in and closes door.*] She *is* too. May I put my bag in here? [*Pointing to Left door.*]

MARGARET

Leave it where it is.

HECTOR

Now, Margaret, don't be so ——

MARGARET

Leave it where it is.

HECTOR

[*Holding out his arms.*] Oh, my *darling girl*, I'm so *glad* to be back. Aren't you going to let me kiss you?

MARGARET

No.

HECTOR

Why not?

MARGARET

Sit down there. I want to talk to you.

HECTOR

[*Sitting Right of table.*] Oh, well, I suppose it's only fair. These preliminaries. I expected something like this. But what have you done with all our lovely things? The room's a barn.

MARGARET

Never mind that.

HECTOR

But I *must* know what you've done with the altar cloth from Ragusa. I can't put my mind on anything till I know that.

MARGARET

It's stored.

HECTOR

But why? And the ivories and the enamels and the little Bronzino ——

MARGARET

Why did you come here?

HECTOR

Because I adore you and can't get along without you, and it's where I belong. Let's smoke.

MARGARET

No, thanks.

HECTOR

Not one of your own special brand? The kind we always used to smoke together? Won't you do that for *me?* [*Lights cigarette.*]

MARGARET

No. Keep still, Hector, and answer me.

HECTOR

[*Jumping up.*] One moment. Let me see if that view is as lovely as I thought it was. [*Goes to window.*] By George, it is. Margaret, do you remember the evening we watched the Alpine glow over the ——

MARGARET

Stop evading my questions and listen to me.

HECTOR

Just a second. Beautiful. Exquisite, really. Tell me, have you actually stayed here ever since — a — ever since?

MARGARET

I've been away for weeks at a time.

HECTOR

But this is practically your home?

MARGARET

Yes.

HECTOR

Now do you know that's just about the most beautiful and touching thing I ever heard. It's poetic. It's sublime. There's high romance in it. You waited here for *me* right in the very spot where I — where we —— It's like Ariadne in Naxos. This dear little village of Bonnieux is *your* Naxos. Margaret in Naxos. We'll forget how Ariadne consoled herself when Theseus went away. With Bacchus, do you remember? Of course I know *you'd* never do that.

MARGARET

[*Regarding him thoughtfully.*] I'd really forgotten how incurably, incredibly shallow you were. Thistledown is heavier.

HECTOR

Oh, I'm a lightweight. Yes. I admit it. But you were happy with your lightweight for eighteen years. He never claimed to be anything else.

MARGARET

That's true. He never did.

HECTOR

[*Approaching her.*] If you'd only let me —— Can't I even take your hand?

MARGARET

[*Rising.*] Don't come near me, Hector. If you so much as touch me, as God is my witness, I will never willingly see you or speak to you again.

HECTOR

[*Whistles.*] Oh, Margaret! What theater. 'As God is your witness.' You sound like Edith Dombey crushing Mr. Carker. My poor darling, you need me, honestly you do, to keep you sane. Do you know why you take that stand? I'll tell you. It's because you know that, if I once had you in my arms again, you'd forget everything that's happened since I left this room three years ago.

MARGARET

Nevertheless, I do take this stand, and I mean every word I said from the bottom of my heart. I think you realize that I mean it.

HECTOR

It's damned *hard* to believe. Ah, Margaret, my darling Margaret, you know you'll forgive me after a while. Why not do it right off, with a magnificent gesture? Then we can settle right down and be happy, as we used to be, and avoid all this disagreeable discussion, all this miserable catechising, that you seem to have in mind.

MARGARET

[*Suddenly laughing.*] Please sit down.

HECTOR

[*His face lighting up.*] There you are. There's the

Margaret I remember. The dearest, most understanding woman that ever lived. Let's keep that other grandiose dame out of it altogether. Haven't I done you good already? Hadn't you forgotten what fun I was? Hadn't you really?

MARGARET

Please sit down.

HECTOR

[*Sitting as before.*] Are you going to be Mrs. Siddons all over again?

MARGARET

[*Sitting opposite him.*] I laughed at the sudden realization of what a ridiculous creature you are. Always so ready to dance, and so firmly resolved never to pay the piper.

HECTOR

That dress isn't a bit becoming. And you don't do yourself any sort of justice with your hair done that way. You need me for all those little things.

MARGARET

Now. To business.

HECTOR

You know how I am about business. Please smoke one. [*Offers cigarette across table.*]

[*She looks at him, smiles and takes one.*]

MARGARET

[*As he starts to rise.*] Sit still. I'll light it.

HECTOR

Had you given them up?

MARGARET

I've never smoked since you left me.

HECTOR

Why? Oh, I know why. Because you never liked it except just smoking this way with me. And you've put away all those charming things we bought together because you couldn't enjoy them without me. [*Looks about room.*] Why, even that glorious eikon we got at Kiev is gone. I don't see how you could do *that*, even for me, but it's without any doubt, the most beautiful thing I ever heard. [*Beams upon her affectionately.*]

MARGARET

Answer me now, Hector.

HECTOR

Oh, not just yet. This is so nice, so nice. You don't know how I've wanted it. Doesn't it seem like a dream?

MARGARET

Which seems like a dream? This present moment or the last three years?

HECTOR

Margaret, how *can* you?

MARGARET

Stop this nonsense. How did you know I was here?

HECTOR

I ran into the Crawfords last week at Ischl. Harry told me. I nearly broke down when he told me. Upon my word I did.

MARGARET

Where is Mrs. Eckhardt?

HECTOR

Oh, don't let's talk about *her*, for God's sake. Why must you go and spoil everything? [*Pushes chair back from table.*]

MARGARET

Have you quarreled?

HECTOR

Oh, no. Not exactly.

MARGARET

Are you tired of her?

HECTOR

Tired? Bored to death. *To death.* [*Rises and goes to window.*] She's awful. Simply awful. No sense at all. And the most ghastly German-American taste.

MARGARET

Her taste can't be any worse than yours. What a cur you are, Hector! To speak to *me* that way about the woman who gave up everything for you. How do you dare do it?

HECTOR

It's your fault for dragging her into our pleasant,

pleasant conversation. If you hadn't mentioned her —— And talk about taste! It's appalling taste for you to allude to her. You should avert your chaste mind from our *ménage* altogether. [*Sits sulkily on desk.*] And you shouldn't have called me a cur. It's not a bit like you. Since when have you taken to calling names? I don't care for that at all.

MARGARET

But you *are* a cur. The only perfect cur I ever knew. If you don't like my saying so, you'd better go now.

HECTOR

[*Irrelevantly, picking up photograph.*] Why do you keep this one out? It's the only one I never liked. Well, perhaps I *am* a cur, if it's being a cur to be perfectly honest with my own wife. But, cur or not, you love me, and can't be happy without me. And I love you. Yes, I do. 'I have been faithful to thee, Cynara, in my fashion.'

MARGARET

What bosh!

HECTOR

It's quite true. And you're going to forgive me presently. And we're going to live happy ever after.

MARGARET

Tell me ——

HECTOR

About Bertha? Well, I will, though it's not a bit

delicate of you to inquire. [*Comes back and sits at table.*]

MARGARET

Has she lost her money?

HECTOR

Now, Margaret. That's hard to forgive. You know my attitude towards money.

MARGARET

I know you'd never take the trouble to make any.

HECTOR

Of course I wouldn't. I never had to. I must say I'm disappointed, bitterly disappointed, to have you bring up anything so sordid as finance. Can't two people ever talk together without the question of money, money, money, cropping up? And yet —— You *are* enjoying this chat?

MARGARET

I've never been so interested in my life. *Has* she lost her money?

HECTOR

No. She has *not* lost her money. She's richer than ever. New oil wells in Texas, Kansas, Oklahoma, wherever the damned things spout. I've been living in the lap of luxury. And I want to come back to you.

MARGARET

You've been living on her money.

HECTOR

Would you mind not harping upon money? It seems to be a perfect obsession with you. You know I have my own small income which gives me a feeling of independence. Of course, when we're living together, I avail myself of her luxuries. I'd be an utter damned fool not to. I suppose you think I ought to run beside her car when she goes motoring.

MARGARET

Is she still as pretty as she was?

HECTOR

Ah, the eternal feminine! No, she isn't. But she's still prettier than most people. And she still has taste in dress, though in nothing else. Absolutely. I'll tell you the main trouble. Her health's been rather breaking down lately.

MARGARET

And of course you couldn't stand that.

HECTOR

No, I most certainly could *not*. You know how sick people always depressed me. That's one thing about you, Margaret. You were always as strong as a horse.

MARGARET

Fortunately for me.

HECTOR

Are you still?

MARGARET

[*Laughing heartily.*] Go on. [*Rising and going to window.*] Don't move. I want to stand here a minute and look out.

HECTOR

This whole past year she's been simply raising hell about her teeth.

MARGARET

Her *teeth?* Oh, *poor* Hector!

HECTOR

Well, it *has* been pretty tough. And such complaining and whining you never heard. You'd think nobody ever had teeth before.

MARGARET

They can be very painful.

HECTOR

My teeth never hurt *me.* [*Looks at her and laughs.*] I'm not really as bad as that. But you know I can't stand sick people about, especially if they complain. I could stand you, though, Margaret, no matter how sick you got.

MARGARET

I wonder.

[*He rises.*]

What are you ——

HECTOR

Oh, don't be so apprehensive. I'm only going to

look at this. [*Examining small picture on Left wall.*] Where did you get this thing?

MARGARET

In Morat.

HECTOR

I don't think much of it. You'd never have got that when I bossed the show. Margaret, it *was* my taste after all.

MARGARET

Where did you say she was?

HECTOR

She and her teeth are in a hospital in Vienna.

MARGARET

Are any of her family with her?

HECTOR

They won't have anything to do with her.

MARGARET

And you came away and left that poor creature ——

HECTOR

That *rich* creature.

MARGARET

And you just simply left her, sick and lonely and sad, in that hospital ——

HECTOR

It's a rest for her. We were getting on each

other's nerves. She's also begun to drink, you know.

MARGARET

Hector! It's nothing short of indecent for you to tell *me* that.

HECTOR

Oh, cut it out. Why should there be any false delicacy between you and me?

MARGARET

I think our situation calls for all the delicacy in the world.

HECTOR

[*Fingering books on table.*] *Corpo di Bacco!* What a stodgy lot of books! Are you going in for a serious line? Don't, for my sake. And remember it's all bunk. These chaps don't know what they're talking about any more than you do. [*Picking up yellow-backed novel.*] Ah, I'm glad to find this grain of leaven. It's bully. Have you read it?

MARGARET

Not yet.

HECTOR

Good. We'll read it aloud.

MARGARET

[*Looking out of window.*] Oh, no, we won't.

HECTOR

For God's sake, stop looking out of the window. Still gloating on that view?

MARGARET

Yes. I don't want to forget it. You see, I'll be leaving Naxos to-morrow or next day.

HECTOR

Where are you going?

MARGARET

Home.

HECTOR

Home! You can't.

MARGARET

Oh, yes, I can. I can make a place for myself again with very little trouble.

HECTOR

But *I* can't go home. I don't want to.

MARGARET

I wouldn't advise *your* going.

HECTOR

Are you really going to let me down like this?

MARGARET

[*Coming to table.*] Didn't you let *me* down, Hector?

HECTOR

I didn't expect this. Really I didn't. I've always thought of you as the noblest, most broad-minded woman in the world, as well as the most companionable and most adorable. When I come back here, wanting to let bygones be bygones, and throw my-

self upon your mercy, it isn't *possible* that you're going to take this narrow, warped, personal, selfish attitude.

MARGARET

Oh, yes, it is. Quite possible. It's precisely the attitude I take.

HECTOR

You're only punishing *yourself*, for you know you'll never be happy without me. And here I stand, ready and willing and anxious ——

MARGARET

I don't expect to be actually happy again, Hector, either here or at home. You've seen to that. But I do most *positively* know I'd never be happy with you any more. My self-respect ——

HECTOR

Self again. And why will people make such a fetish of self-respect? I never had any.

MARGARET

Nor honor, either.

HECTOR

They're both ancient bugbears, completely *démodé*. They never get you anywhere, and they're forever interfering with everything that's nice and jolly and comfortable.

MARGARET

How soon can you get back to Vienna?

HECTOR

I'm not going back to Vienna. I've burned my bridges.

MARGARET

Did you tell *her* you were deserting her?

HECTOR

I couldn't. She's lost in a mist of morphine and doctors and nurses and psycho-analysts — and cognac. I intended to write her some day. I even thought that, after while, when we'd settled comfortably down together, I might perhaps get you to just drop her an explanatory line yourself. You always wrote such good letters.

MARGARET

[*Laughing.*] I dare say you really did. How did you get here?

HECTOR

En auto.

MARGARET

Hers?

HECTOR

Yes. Why not? She's not using it.

MARGARET

Where is it?

HECTOR

Oh, it's somewhere round, I fancy.

MARGARET

[*At window.*] Is it this huge car over there?

HECTOR

[*Looking out.*] Yes. That's it. Isn't it a beauty?

MARGARET

It's one bridge you didn't burn.

HECTOR

But I was going to send it back.

MARGARET

Not really.

HECTOR

I thought, perhaps, you and I might take one little trip in it, before I sent it back. Just a short one. There are the loveliest places to go.

MARGARET

Please go, Hector, Every word you say is an offense to me now. Go back to Vienna as soon as you can.

HECTOR

Honestly, I don't see *how* I can. I don't care for her any longer. It seems, somehow, sinful. You're sending me back to a life of sin. Do you realize that?

[*She goes to Left door.*]

Wait, Margaret. And she won't be 'deserted.' A woman with that much money never is. Desertion simply doesn't 'take' in a case like that. And you're treating me so ungenerously.

MARGARET

Please go.

HECTOR

If it had been you who'd 'gone off with a handsomer man,' I'd have waited for you three years, ten years. And when you came back, I'd have opened my arms and my heart, and never asked a single question. I'd have been glad to get you back on any terms.

MARGARET

That may be true. You're such a strange creature, Hector, it probably *is* true. I'll have to disappoint you by being absolutely different. And *I'd* never have had the unparalleled effrontery to *come* back.

HECTOR

I don't see how I *can* go back to Bertha. I'm so tired of the life. I should think you'd see the pathos of it all. And she's no companion for me. And then I'm not young any more, Margaret. I'm fifty. You have to think of all those things. Doesn't that touch you at all?

MARGARET

Not in the very least. And here's another thing for you to think of, which never seems to occur to you. Does she still love you?

HECTOR

Oh — a — why — a — yes. I think she does, rather. When she's sober.

MARGARET

I will not tolerate another of those brutal allu-

sions. Go back to her, Hector. I will think slightly less ill of you if you do. Perhaps *she* needs you. I don't.

HECTOR

But *I* need *you*. And after all, we're still man and wife. It would all be such plain sailing if you'd only be reasonable. Bertha will be all right, I tell you. She'll be *all right*. And everybody'll think she only gets what's coming to her. She stole your husband, and now he's broken away from her spell and come back to you.

MARGARET

I have nothing more to say to you. You're frightfully in the way, you know. I've got to plan all my packing. And I hardly know how to begin. [*Looks thoughtfully around room.*]

HECTOR

You might begin by chucking that poisonous little picture, which you bought without my advice, out into the Place. When did you decide to leave Naxos?

MARGARET

Within the last half-hour. I'm really awfully indebted to you, Hector. You've broken the queer spell that kept me in this place, and now I'm free to go home, where I belong.

HECTOR

Seeing me again has broken the spell?

MARGARET

Yes. Seeing you as you really are, with all your glaring marks of deterioration ——

HECTOR

It's your duty to keep me from deteriorating any further. Quitter! What did you promise at the altar? To love and to cherish —— Whom God hath joined ——

MARGARET

Oh, stop that ribaldry. Everything you say only shows me how far we've grown apart.

HECTOR

Is it no good, Margaret? Won't you have me at any price?

MARGARET

None. You know I won't.

HECTOR

Are you afraid of me any longer?

MARGARET

Not a bit.

HECTOR

Then you'll shake hands?

MARGARET

Certainly. [*Giving him her hand.*]

HECTOR

[*Looking in her eyes a moment.*] By Jove, it's true.

You *do* mean it. Now isn't that funny! But you ought to have pangs at sending me back to my wallowing in the mire. [*Laughs.*]

MARGARET

[*Laughing.*] Good-bye.

HECTOR

Good-bye. But you *have* enjoyed this little chat? Do you ever expect to have such a good time again?

MARGARET

It's been the most wonderful half-hour of my life. Good-bye, Hector. Gratefully, good-bye. I owe all my future peace of mind to you.

HECTOR

[*Picking up bag.*] Doesn't even this touch you? The confiding way that I came back to you?

[*She shakes her head. He looks at her a moment, then goes out.* MARGARET *goes to desk, without looking at him and takes up photograph. He thrusts his head round corner of door which he has not yet closed.*]

But if anything should happen to Bertha?

MARGARET

Nothing can happen to anybody that will ever induce me to live with you again, Hector.

HECTOR

All in one half-hour. What are you going to do with my picture? Tear it up or turn it to the wall?

MARGARET

Oh, neither. It shall remind me of my eternal gratitude to you. Don't you realize that you, your own self, have set me free? I'm going to erect a household shrine to — Hector the Liberator, and set your picture in the midst.

HECTOR

[*In doorway, bag in hand.*] Be careful you don't bow down to it and worship it. Pure bravado. I'll give you one more chance. Last time of asking. Margaret, won't you have this man to be your wedded husband ——

MARGARET

Never.

HECTOR

Never's such a long word, Margaret. Let's make it 'auf wiedersehen.'

[*He waves his hat and goes out. She stands looking after him.*]

CURTAIN

THE COUGH

PLAY IN ONE ACT

CHARACTERS

NINA BARCLAY
TOM HOWE

SCENE

Any country club at the present day

THE COUGH

The scene is the entrance hall of a country club. One or two pictures on wall. Row of wicker chairs along back of scene, with brass stand holding matches and ash tray. Doors Right and Left. It is eleven-thirty P.M.

A charming YOUNG GIRL *is sitting back Center with evening wrap over her ball gown, evidently waiting to depart, with great impatience. She irritably turns the pages of 'Town and Country' and taps her foot on the ground. Looks at wrist watch, then at magazine. She suddenly flings down magazine, stands, and presses electric bell at back for fifteen seconds. No sound.*

A YOUNG MAN *comes in Right in top hat, overcoat, white silk scarf, and gloves. He takes off hat, hesitates a second, then crosses to Left door. She turns towards him as he enters, then quickly sits, picks up magazine, and seems absorbed in it. Just as he opens door Left, she coughs. He stops and turns, coming several steps towards her.*

HE

I beg your pardon? [*Pause.*] I beg your pardon? [*She languidly raises her eyes, gives him a haughty stare, and plunges again into 'Town and Country.'*]

I thought you spoke. Didn't you?

SHE

No.

HE

I was mistaken?

SHE

Utterly.

HE

Oh, well. Sorry. [*Goes to door Left and is just going out when she coughs again. He stops, turns, considers her seriously for a moment, then comes nearer, takes off overcoat and throws it, with scarf and gloves, on chair, and lays hat on top of them. He then sits, two chairs away from her, beside match stand. He takes out cigarette and lights it.*] Do you mind?

[*She rises and pushes bell furiously for ten seconds.*]

I wouldn't do that, you know. That bell's been out of order for a month.

SHE

This club's abominably run. Aren't you on the house committee?

HE

Just.

SHE

How long have you been on?

HE

Oh, only since — a —— About — a, about — a ——

SHE

About a *month.* [*Gives short and very provoking laugh, goes to door Right and looks out.*]

HE

Oh, look here, you know. I didn't bust all the bells as soon as they put me on the house committee.

SHE

It's pitch dark out here. Are the servants all gone? I never saw such a place. It's odd, though, really, the steady deterioration of this club in one short month. Food, service, general tone, everything.

HE

At least it still affords you shelter against the weather.

SHE

It does. Thus far. I doubt if it will a month from now, under this management. Mismanagement. [*Goes to door Left and looks out.*] Thank Heaven, I can see the car.

HE

That's good. Why don't you hop into it and leave the darned place before it caves in altogether? Everybody else has gone to the Rutherfords' dance. You're going there, I suppose?

SHE

I'm waiting for my brother.

HE

Oh! You are? For Ralph? Oh!

SHE

I fancy you know very well that I'm waiting for Ralph. Didn't you see him downstairs?

HE

Oh, yes, I saw him. I *certainly* saw him.

SHE

What do you mean by that?

HE

By what?

SHE

By the word 'certainly' pronounced in that tone?

HE

I mean I'm not certain *he* saw *me*, if you must know.

SHE

Do you mean ——

HE

Of course I mean that. Oh, Nina —— [*Rises.*]

SHE

My name is Barclay.

HE

I know damned well what your name is. And I know what it's going to be one of these days.

SHE

Please don't swear at me, Mr. Howe. You no longer have the right.

HE

Oh, rot! Listen to me.

SHE

I listened to you for two hours by the clock last night. I hoped for the last time.

HE

Listen this one time more. You've all the time in the world, if you're really going to wait for Ralph.

SHE

[*With annoyance.*] Oh! [*Goes Right again, looks out and stands uncertainly.*]

HE

Do you mean to tell me, on your word of honor, that you didn't cough to attract my attention, when I passed you and opened that door?

SHE

I decline to answer such an unchivalrous suggestion.

HE

And then that second cough, when I was going away again. How about *it?* [*Silence.*] Didn't you do *that* on purpose? *Didn't* you?

SHE

I did not.

HE

Well, it's very funny. These coincidences —— [*Sits.*]

SHE

I can't help what you call coincidences. I

shouldn't have come out to-night at all. I've been at home all day. But I had to help Fanny Martin out with this dinner at the club, and then Mary Rutherford insisted that I should go on to her dance. I should really be at home, and in bed. I have a very nasty cough.

HE

Call it a tricky cough. A treacherous cough.

SHE

At any rate, it is beyond my control.

HE

Oh, wait. I have something here. [*Rummages in overcoat.*]

SHE

Are you going to offer me a flask?

HE

Nothing so jocund. I've some troches somewhere. Ah! [*Producing box.*] Here. Try a troche for your tricky, treacherous cough.

SHE

No, thank you.

HE

Oh, come on, take one. They go down just as easy. [*Swallows one.*]

SHE

Thank you, no. Positively.

HE

I've noticed a queer thing about that cough.

SHE

You have, indeed.

HE

Oh, not that. It's something else. Do you know you haven't coughed once since I joined you?

SHE

And you infer ——?

HE

Well, a fellow can put two and two together.

SHE

And make five. You seem to have made quite a study of cough psychology.

HE

I've seen some very pleasant acquaintances begin that way. In trains and places.

SHE

Well, upon my word! Frankly, Mr. Howe, I feel no interest in your — adventures.

HE

I didn't say they were my adventures.

SHE

Don't you feel that such allusions are in extremely bad taste? But of course *you* wouldn't.

HE

I didn't expect you to be so knowing.

SHE

And speaking of bad taste, if you'll forgive my mentioning it, I am amazed, perfectly amazed, to see you here at all to-night.

HE

Why?

SHE

Why? Well, of course, if you're capable of asking that question, you are *in*capable of understanding why.

HE

How about you? *I'm* shocked to see *you* here, if you ask me.

SHE

I don't. And there is no parallel between our cases. The breaking of our engagement was a matter of sheer rejoicing to me. The luckiest thing that ever happened to me. But when I think of the way you looked when you left the house last night. And what you said ——

HE

How did I look? Well, of course, you can't show me that. But what did I say? Sit down.

SHE

No, thank you. Well, a broken heart was mentioned, if I remember, and a ruined life, and, oh,

yes, a jet-black future, and a manly and laudable determination to throw up your excellent job and break as many more hearts as possible by going to the dogs.

HE

Well, I felt that way. I feel that way still.

SHE

Yes, you do. Look at that tie.

HE

I can't. Is it all right?

SHE

Look at that waistcoat.

HE

Well, I *can* do that. [*Looking down.*]

SHE

That tie was never tied, that waistcoat was never buttoned, by a man with a broken heart.

HE

[*With low bow.*] I thank you.

SHE

When I've thought of you to-day, I've thought of you as a broken-hearted man in the lowest depths of despair.

HE

Then you *have* thought of me. *Please* sit down.

SHE

I prefer to stand.

HE

You know you vowed last night you'd never think of me again.

SHE

I haven't actually thought of you. I've been going to think of you once or twice, but have always diverted my thoughts to a worthier object.

HE

But each time you've been going to think of me, you've been going to think of me as a broken-hearted man in the lowest depths of despair. You may leave the stand.

SHE

Twist my words as you choose, so long as you recognize the fact that I broke our engagement last night, irrevocably and forever.

HE

Well, now, see here. *Won't* you sit down?

SHE

No. Positively not. [*Looks at watch.*] Oh, Heavens! The time. It's ten minutes of twelve. [*She walks nervously Right, then Left, then stops in front of him.*] What shall I do?

HE

Sit down.

[*She walks angrily away.*]

No, forgive me. What shall you do? Why, take

me on again. Give me another show. You'll never regret it. Forget last night. With a well-trained memory like yours, it ought to be quite easy.

SHE

That incident is closed, Mr. Howe. Dead and buried.

HE

Let's resurrect it.

SHE

Impossible. This time I wasn't thinking of you at all. It's about Ralph. What shall we — I mean what shall I — do about him?

HE

About Ralph?

SHE

Yes. About *Ralph.* What do you suggest?

HE

I suggest a policy of watchful waiting.

SHE

Just sitting here ——

HE

Ah, if you only would.

SHE

Well, I won't. Just staying here, you and I, indefinitely?

HE

Until Ralph is ready to move or *be* moved. I think it's a grand idea.

SHE

You know this sort of thing is perfectly horrible to me.

HE

Well, so it is to me, too, when it goes too far, and interferes with my own convenience.

SHE

I didn't know he'd been drinking at all lately.

HE

Really?

SHE

He told me he hadn't touched a drop for six months.

HE

Did he?

SHE

And he promised me faithfully he wouldn't take a thing to-night.

HE

Indeed?

SHE

I hate that horrid short way of answering. Are you insinuating ——

HE

No, I'm not. Ralph's present condition is not one for insinuation or innuendo.

SHE

[*Coming Center and sinking into chair.*] Oh, I'm miserable. I'm perfectly miserable. Why do they do such things?

[*He makes movement towards her, but restrains himself.*]

HE

Oh —— I don't know.

SHE

Was he so bad when you saw him?

HE

Well — a ——

SHE

I mean you could tell he'd been drinking.

HE

Oh, yes, I could tell he'd been drinking. Gosh! Helen Keller could have told.

[*She buries her face in her handkerchief.*]

I'm damned sorry. Honestly I am. But don't feel too badly. Everybody, practically, does, or has, sometime or other.

SHE

But — but —— Mr. Howe, will you do something for me?

HE

You bet I will! What?

SHE

Will you go down and see — and see — how he is now? Then we can tell ——

HE

Sure I will, but —— Oh, well ——

[*He goes off Right. She watches him until he disappears, then quickly takes out vanity case, surveys herself in mirror, powders her nose, and reddens her lips. Puts everything swiftly away and sits with folded hands. He comes in Right while she is thus occupied, steps out and comes in again, repressing desire to smile.*]

SHE

Well?

HE

Well — a ——

SHE

What was he doing?

HE

Do you really want to know?

SHE

Yes.

HE

He was throwing dice at the stuffed alligator I gave the grill-room last year for a trophy.

SHE

Now that's nonsense. Throwing dice with a stuffed alligator. I never heard such ——

HE

I didn't say 'with.' I said 'at.'

SHE

You said 'with.'

HE

Well, he's probably doing that now.

SHE

Your attempts at wit, Mr. Howe, are exceedingly distasteful to me. If anything could confirm me in my decision of last night it would be your callousness on this occasion. [*Rising.*] Oh, I wonder —— Father simply mustn't know. And poor Mother ——

[*Begins to cry behind her handkerchief.*]

HE

[*Rising and looking at her uncertainly.*] Oh, Nina ——

SHE

Miss B-Barclay, please.

HE

Oh, Lord! Well, Miss Barclay, then. This is all such utter rot. The world's not coming to an end because Ralph took too much to drink to-night. He's only a kid, and a very nice one. He'll get over it. Don't let's talk about him any more. I tell you what.

SHE

What?

HE

If you'll let me have five minutes' conversation with you now ——

SHE

I told you ——

HE

I know, but let me finish. If you will, I promise to take Ralph completely off your shoulders, onto mine. He can sleep here to-night. I'll take you to the ball, come back, and arrange everything. You can tell some graceful, necessary yarn to the old folks at home, and to-morrow morning I'll talk to him like a Dutch uncle. I'm just enough older to do it and I think he has some regard for my opinion. Is it a bargain?

SHE

Can't you get him up now?

HE

No, I certainly cannot. You wouldn't like it a bit if I did. [*Sits.*]

SHE

But I can't go to the dance with *you!*

HE

Why not? Everybody thinks we're still engaged. *I* haven't peeped. And you've been at home all day. Unless you telephoned Helen Crocker and gave her the broadcasting privileges.

SHE

I did nothing of the sort. Please don't start *that* again.

HE

Does your mother know?

SHE

[*After momentary hesitation.*] No.

HE

Well, then. [*He moves ash stand to chair beside her and sits.*] Convenient, aren't they? [*Pointing to ash stand.*]

SHE

I think it was simply inexcusable of Fanny Martin to have all those cocktails to-night. And then that champagne too. In these days. And with all those young people.

HE

It certainly does make a party go, you know, if you have decent stuff.

SHE

I should prefer not to have a party 'go' at all.

HE

Oh, no, you wouldn't.

SHE

And Jack Martin gave some of the older men liqueurs. I saw it.

HE

Look here, Carrie Nation, would you mind leaving the liquor issue alone for five minutes?

SHE

A well-regulated club shouldn't allow such things.

HE

We've agreed it isn't well-regulated.

SHE

And as you're on the house committee ——

[*He rises, picks up his belongings, and goes Left to door. Looks at her, comes back, and is about to throw them into chair.*]

And of course there'll be more to drink at the Rutherfords'.

[*Once more he starts Left, again hesitates, comes back, throws overcoat, etc., into chair and stands beside her.*]

HE

What if there is? Ralph's not going. I can take care of myself, and I suppose I needn't warn *you* to go slow. Will you listen to me now?

SHE

What do you want to say?

HE

I want to hold a perfectly academic discussion on a matter of vital importance to myself.

SHE

Well?

HE

That was a devil of a row we had last night, Miss Barclay ——

SHE

It was a hideous scene, hideous, revolting ——

HE

Oh, I wouldn't say that. Lovers' quarrels, you know ——

SHE

It takes two to make a lovers' quarrel, Mr. Howe. Two lovers, I mean. Fortunately it occurred before and not after our marriage.

HE

Please call me 'Tom' again, just for to-night. That 'Mr. Howe' stuff shrivels my very soul.

SHE

I shall never call you 'Tom' again, Mr. Howe.

HE

'Tommy,' then?

SHE

Idiot!

HE

Nobody ever pronounced my poor old name as you did, Miss Barclay. It was like music, the way you used to say 'Tom.'

SHE

Is this the academic discussion?

HE

No. This is. What started our quarrel last night?

SHE

I don't remember.

HE

[*Sitting beside her.*] Yes, you do.

SHE

I do not. So many dreadful things were said.

HE

All by me?

SHE

Certainly, all by you.

HE

And you maintained a profound, philosophic calm throughout the discussion?

SHE

Oh, no. I *was* annoyed.

HE

Annoyed!!

SHE

And I dare say I betrayed it.

HE

Oh, you did. A more complete betrayal of annoyance I have never witnessed.

SHE

Well, you were *exasperating* enough. Oh, I remember now. I did feel that I must resent what you said about Helen Crocker, the best friend I have in the world. I should think that even *you*

would feel that I couldn't let that pass, in common loyalty. You were cruel, bitter, ungentlemanly ——

HE

What did I say about Helen?

SHE

You said she was ——

HE

I said she was a cat. And so she is a cat. The queen cat of the whole feline race. But I'm sorry I said it, and I wouldn't have, if you hadn't started the whole shooting match by what *you* said about Evelyn Jones.

SHE

[*At a loss.*] Evelyn Jones? Evelyn Jones? I don't seem to remember.

HE

Oh, cut it out. You remember perfectly.

SHE

[*Rising.*] I'm going.

HE

[*Rising.*] You shan't. Not for a moment.

SHE

Coward, bully!

HE

Oh, can those obsolete expressions. Yes, you've got to hear me now. Sit down till I finish. I'm

fighting for my life, Nina. Ralph and Fate and Bacchus have played into my hands.

[*She sits, facing him defiantly.*]

Now I'm going to recapitulate. Just try to remember. When I got there last night, you were looking at those pictures of the Charity Ball. Weren't you?

[*She nods.*]

And there was a picture of Evelyn Jones in gypsy dress. Wasn't there?

SHE

I believe so.

HE

We'll never get anywhere if you take that tone. Play fair, for God's sake, Nina. After all, you're the squarest girl I ever knew, as well as the sweetest. And so transparently honest.

SHE

Naïve, perhaps?

HE

Not too naïve. But anyway, we *were* looking at this picture, and I, like a damned fool, said something complimentary ——

SHE

Why 'like a damned fool'?

HE

Oh, you know why. I said Evelyn was a nice-looking little thing, or something like that.

SHE

It wasn't a bit like that.

HE

Well, what was it?

SHE

'How amazingly pretty that girl is.' And all I said to that was, that I thought her prettiness, which I admitted, was rather spoiled by her being so frightfully ill at ease.

HE

No, my dear. You said you could see no real beauty in anybody who was as common and cheap and ordinary as Evelyn Jones, but, of course, she was no friend of yours.

SHE

And you, instead of letting it rest there, what did *you* do? You said that she was outrageously pretty all the same, and had the bluest eyes you ever saw. 'The color of forget-me-nots.' I wish you could have heard yourself, and seen yourself, when you said that. You seemed to think you'd originated a brand-new comparison.

HE

Well, I must have been crazy. [*Sits.*]

SHE

For thinking it?

HE

No, for saying it. I *said* I was a damned fool. What did we say next?

SHE

You said ——

HE

I said, furthermore, that she was a nice, jolly, sweet-tempered girl, who had had no advantages, but managed to have more genuinely good manners than a dozen girls whom I could name ——

SHE

Whom you *did* name, and they were all particular friends of mine. And *then* you went on to say, out of sheer spite, picking up the picture, and looking at it closely, caressingly, almost kissing it, in fact, and in a sickening sort of cooing voice —— Do you remember?

HE

Why, I think I was ass enough to say that she had nice hair.

SHE

[*Laughs.*] Nice hair! You said that the way it r-r-rippled down over her temples was poetic —— You said something about a Greek nymph.

HE

I never said anything so asinine.

SHE

You did. And then you went *on* to say that the loveliest thing about it was the way it grew at the back of her neck. And that *did* disgust me. I didn't mind all the other fulsome compliments as much as that.

HE

But why?

SHE

Never mind why, Mr. Howe, but the next time you're engaged, don't go to your fiancée to praise the way another girl's hair grows at the back of her neck. It's indelicate and insulting and absolutely the wrong tack.

HE

I'll remember. But what was it you said to that?

SHE

I know what you mean, but I was so outraged I was driven to it. I said that her hair was a wonderful color too, though the fact that she did something to it was a secret to nobody in town but you. And then I said, 'Don't let's talk any more about Evelyn Jones, for a few minutes ——'

HE

'If you don't mind ——'

SHE

Yes, 'if you don't mind, because the subject seems to bring out all our worst qualities.'

HE

And then, as I recall, we talked about books and plays and cross-word puzzles for about ten minutes ——

SHE

Until Helen's name was mentioned. And then such a *torrent* of abuse as I heard ——

HE

Oh, 'torrent of abuse'! Rats!

SHE

In justice to myself I couldn't sit still ——

HE

Well, you certainly didn't.

SHE

And then it went on from bad to worse. Regular Billingsgate.

HE

On both sides.

SHE

It humiliates me to think of it. Fortunately, as our relations are severed, such a scene can never occur again. And now ——

HE

[*Seizing her hand as she is about to rise.*] Wait, Nina. I'll tell you what's the matter with you. You're jealous.

SHE

Of you, I suppose?

HE

Absolutely. [*Nodding his head.*]

SHE

[*Wrenching her hand away.*] Let me go! [*Springs up.*] This is a little too much. I won't answer that.

HE

[*Gets in front of her as she starts Left.*] You can't. Oh, Nina, all love worth having contains a few grains of jealousy, more or less. I know I'm as jealous as a Turk of *you*. I hate to see another man dance with you or touch your hand. And I wanted to make sure of you. That was all a scheme of mine last night. I wanted to test you. You had never shown a spark of jealousy before. I was afraid your affection was too cool.

SHE

And you were satisfied with the result of your experiment?

HE

Absolutely. Despite the temporary rift, I knew that we were made for each other when I closed that door.

SHE

If you call that closing the door, I should like to hear you slam it. [*She smiles.*]

HE

You smile. Ah, Nina. As you like. Perhaps it *did* slip out of my hand. But no matter what I did or said, no matter how I looked, my scheme had worked, and I knew you really loved me when I left the house. Oh, Nina, darling, say it's all on again. Please do. Please.

SHE

You look forward to a series of these devastating

scenes in a future married life with me? I can't say I think it an inviting prospect.

HE

Dearest, it will never happen again. Don't I tell you I did it just this one time on purpose? It was like an experiment in chemistry. What do I care for Evelyn Jones's back hair? That! [*Snapping his fingers.*] Say it's on again. [*Moves towards her.*]

SHE

[*Stopping him.*] I'm going now. Alone. This jealousy theory of yours is the most absurd thing I ever heard, and I won't discuss it. [*As he moves again and starts to speak.*] Keep still and don't come near me. I'm going away to-morrow for ten days.

HE

Where?

SHE

Never mind where. When I come home I shall probably run across you somewhere ——

HE

Oh, probably. It's almost inevitable in a community like this.

SHE

I'm going now. [*Moves slightly Left.*] You'll look after Ralph?

HE

Of course. But I can't let you go alone.

SHE

In my own car. At my age. My fourth winter. Stand where you are. [*Moves a few steps Left and stands with her back to him.*] I think I could forgive practically everything except your outrageous assumption that I coughed to attract your attention.

HE

[*Suppressing a smile.*] You totally misunderstood me about that cough.

SHE

Really?

HE

Yes. I didn't mean that you coughed on purpose *at all.*

SHE

What did you mean? It sounded very like it.

HE

It's hard to explain.

SHE

Quite impossible, I should think, if words mean anything whatever.

HE

Oh, but they don't, my dear. Not in themselves. It's all in the tone and emphasis and general byplay. Now, let me see, I think I sort of meant that it wasn't a voluntary cough from the throat, but a kind of a subconscious, involuntary cough — from the soul — as it were. Yes, that's what it was. A soul cough.

SHE

A *soul* cough. Are you ——

HE

Yes, it was the involuntary signal, the cry for help, as you might say, of your soul when it found itself in the presence of its soul mate, meaning mine.

SHE

I can*not* stand rubbish about soul mates. [*Going, but coughs at third step.*]

HE

[*Springing after her, whirling her round and kissing her.*] The soul cough. And you were warned.

SHE

As if I could help —— Tom, don't.

HE

Ah! 'Tom'! Music of the spheres. Nobody ever said it like you. Once more.

SHE

Tom! Idiot!

CURTAIN

MAY AND DECEMBER

PLAY IN ONE ACT

CHARACTERS

EMMY TROWBRIDGE, 22
JAMES PLUNKETT, 49
KENNETH BARBOUR, 24
MRS. TROWBRIDGE, 47

MAY AND DECEMBER

The action takes place in MRS. TROWBRIDGE'S *living-room, late on a September afternoon. The room is homelike and attractive, but very simply furnished. Two windows Back. Fireplace Right. Sofa near it. Doors Right and Left. Large table Center with lamp, books, etc. Big chair either side table.*

When curtain rises, EMMY TROWBRIDGE *is standing by Right window with* JAMES PLUNKETT. *She is an attractive girl of twenty-two, and he is a genial, prosperous-looking man of forty-nine.*

EMMY

[*Pointing out of window.*] You can't possibly miss it. Right up Elm Street two blocks. Then to the right, and it's the second house on the left. And you ought to hurry. Mother'll be waiting. And she'll love another opportunity to show you off.

PLUNKETT

Ah, come with me. I'm in fear of strange faces.

EMMY

I can't, Mr. Plunkett.

PLUNKETT

James.

EMMY

It sounds so ——

PLUNKETT

Don't say 'disrespectful.'

EMMY

We'll say 'awkward.' When you and Mother are once safely married, I think it will come easier.

PLUNKETT

We'll never be snug till you do. I'll put no trust in your filial affection till I hear you say 'James' without flinching.

EMMY

Don't you worry about my filial affection. You could never know how happy I am that she's marrying a man like you. There have been others, you know.

PLUNKETT

I'll engage there have. Poor devils! Ah, Emmy, come with me. You'd never believe how my heart goes back on me. All those old friends of your mother's, looking at me as though they expected a jig out of me, and couldn't rightly believe I'm an Irishman because I carry no hod.

EMMY

I've simply got to stay and see Kenneth Barbour. He sounded perfectly wild over the telephone. I can't imagine what's the matter with him. He's just back from the West to-day, and I haven't seen him since we went abroad.

PLUNKETT

It's likely he's heard about *us*.

EMMY

Well, that wouldn't be any reason for him to get so wrought up. Go now, do. You'll be back in twenty minutes, and he'll still be here.

PLUNKETT

Well, good-bye, my dear.

EMMY

You haven't called me one of those nice Irish names for hours. I think it's time for 'Mavourneen.'

PLUNKETT

No, it's time for 'acushla.' Au revoir, acushla.

EMMY

Oh, not 'au revoir.' What's the use of having an Irish step-father if he can't think of anything more Gaelic than 'au revoir'?

PLUNKETT

I've run clean out of my Gaelic. Well, Erin go bragh, Emmy machree.

EMMY

I'll sit here and look at my ring, bless you, till Kenneth comes. How good you are to me! What have I ever done to deserve such a step-father — and such a ring!

PLUNKETT

Sure, if the jewel were the size of the Rock of Cashel, it'd still be unworthy of you, asthore.

EMMY

Now that's the colorful talk I like to hear. [*Throws him a kiss.*]

[*He waves his hand and goes out Left. She comes to chair Left of table and sits, looking at ring and humming 'The Wearin' of the Green.' Pause. The door Right bursts violently open and* KENNETH BARBOUR *rushes in. He is a good-looking fellow of twenty-four, in riding-clothes, evidently in a state of great agitation.*]

EMMY

[*Rising.*] Why, Kenneth ——

KENNETH

[*Drawing clipping roughly torn from newspaper out of his pocket and throwing it on table.*] Explain this.

EMMY

Explain what? What do you mean? Aren't you going to speak to me?

KENNETH

Not until I know the meaning of this. [*Pounding clipping with his fist.*]

EMMY

Well, this is the most extraordinary behavior when I haven't seen you for six months. Oh, Kenneth, you aren't —— You haven't been ——

KENNETH

No, I haven't been *drinking*. But I'll very likely

drink myself to death unless you explain this to my satisfaction.

EMMY

Good Heavens! Is it anything serious?

KENNETH

Serious as hell.

EMMY

Now, just stop right there, Mr. Kenneth Barbour. Unless you're prepared to speak to me civilly, I won't even look at that paper, and you can ride straight back home as soon as you please. The sooner the better.

KENNETH

Don't try to evade. Read that.

[*She takes up paper.*]

Now explain it. [*Walks to extreme Left, then turns.*]

EMMY

This Hart, Schaffner and Marx advertisement? I can't. I never could see why anybody wants those absurd, aggressive shoulders.

KENNETH

You shan't dodge the issue like that. [*Seizing paper, reversing it, and handing it back to her.*] There! Explain that, I say. [*Walks to extreme Right, then turns.*]

EMMY

This is something about French indebtedness.

I'm afraid I can't explain *it either*. I never understood it!

[*He snatches it from her, looks at it, throws it down and fumbles in his pocket.*]

KENNETH

I must have torn out the wrong thing. Well —— I haven't it, but you know very well what I mean.

EMMY

I know nothing of the kind.

KENNETH

I didn't think you'd lie to me, Emmy.

[*She goes to door Right and opens it as though leaving.*]

Wait, Emmy. I'm sorry. But listen. You've got to tell me this. Are you, or are you not, engaged to be married?

EMMY

Why do you ask?

KENNETH

You're afraid to tell me. That's all I wanted to know. Good-bye. [*Opens door Left.*]

EMMY

Don't be such an idiot. Who told you I was engaged?

KENNETH

I read it half an hour ago in the paper.

EMMY

What paper?

KENNETH

The 'Forestville Clarion.' In the 'Dame Rumor' Column.

EMMY

In the 'Dame Rumor' Column? *No!* What did it say? I love Avis Avenel's style. I'm terribly sorry you didn't bring it.

KENNETH

It said there was every reason to believe that your engagement would shortly be announced to some man you'd met abroad.

EMMY

Did it mention his name?

KENNETH

What do I care for his damned name? It's the fact that matters.

EMMY

What did your family say?

KENNETH

I haven't seen them. I only got home two hours ago. A day ahead of time. I got back so happy, right on my toes, crazy to see you again after all these months and wanting to hear about your trip, and to tell you about the wonderful time I've had in Wyoming. Of course, when I saw that infernal paper I jumped right on my horse and rode over, and now what do I find ——

EMMY

Oh, do let's hear about Wyoming. Why can't we sit down? I knew a ranch would be just the thing for you. That sunburn is simply ——

KENNETH

You leave my sunburn alone. And Wyoming! Hell! What are you trying to do? You're trying to sidestep and gain time and I won't have it. You just look me square in the eyes and tell me the truth. Yes or no? If you have the courage. I think I have a right to ask.

EMMY

I have all the courage I need to tell *you* anything. But you *know* you haven't any real right to ask. Now, as I understand it, you want me to tell you if I'm engaged or not.

KENNETH

I do. Yes or no.

[*She turns to window, her hands clasped in front of her, then slowly turns and holds out her left hand. He approaches and sees handsome ring on her engagement finger.*]

Is this — this — blazing gewgaw from him?

EMMY

Oh, *Kenneth!* Where did you ever get that? My poor, dear humorless boy. Yes. This glittering bauble, this meretricious, soulless trinket, is from him.

[*He sinks into chair by table and covers his face with his hands.*]

[*Laying a hand on his shoulder.*] I didn't know you felt ——

KENNETH

[*Springing up and dashing her hand away.*] Don't touch me! You knew damned well how I felt. It's all over. Of all the shallow, heartless, superficial girls —— You're a coquette, Emmy, that's what you are, a shallow, heartless, superficial ——

EMMY

Please speak modern English. Why this sudden linguistic throw-back into the nineteenth century?

KENNETH

[*Going to Right door.*] I won't speak at all. I'm afraid I'd say things —— Good-bye. [*Opens door.*]

EMMY

Don't you want to know anything at all about him? I'd love to tell you.

KENNETH

You 'want me to be the first to know.' Ha, ha! Well, I won't listen. [*Goes halfway through door, then pauses, comes in and closes door.*] Go ahead. [*Walks to Left window and looks out, then to Left door, then to Right window.*] Well? Go ahead.

EMMY

I can't possibly talk to you if you're going to swoop round the room like a June-bug. Please sit down or stand still.

KENNETH

[*Stalking down Left.*] I can't.

EMMY

Well, I'll wait until you can. Perhaps you'd like me to run up and down beside you. I'm not going to.

KENNETH

[*Sitting heavily by table.*] Well. Now. Go ahead.

EMMY

Am I to start right in to talk about him without any leading questions from you?

KENNETH

Certainly. Tell me how much you love him. Shoot.

EMMY

I'm not a prima donna singing a solo about love. This has got to be a duet. What do you want to ask about him?

KENNETH

Nothing.

EMMY

Oh, I fancy you can think of several things, if you make an effort. Shouldn't you like to know his name?

KENNETH

What is it?

EMMY

Plunkett. James Plunkett.

KENNETH

What a name! Sounds like a plumber.

EMMY

If you don't like 'James,' you may call him 'Shamus.'

KENNETH

Why should I call him that, for God's sake?

EMMY

It's Irish for 'James.'

KENNETH

Is he *Irish?*

EMMY

He is.

KENNETH

Irish?

EMMY

Stop yelling 'Irish' at me. I've told you he's Irish.

KENNETH

A Mick, of course?

EMMY

No, he isn't. He's a Presbyterian.

KENNETH

I thought they were *all* Micks.

EMMY

Did you ever hear of Ulster?

KENNETH

Just. I always skip that stuff in the paper. I suppose he's a count.

EMMY

They don't have counts in Ireland, owl.

KENNETH

Now, that's just where you're wrong. Might be a Papal count. I knew a fellow whose father ——

EMMY

I don't know anything about the fellow's father, but I can assure you that no Pope yet ever made a Papal count out of an Ulster Presbyterian.

KENNETH

That reminds me. I did read something about Ulster last spring. A peach of a story in the 'Saturday Evening Post.' It all comes back to me now. There was a nice young girl, very pretty too ——

EMMY

I'm sure she was pretty if she was a heroine of the 'Saturday Evening Post.'

KENNETH

And *she* was married to a most terrible old curmudgeon. And *he* was a dour, narrow-minded, Scotch-Irish Presbyterian from the north of Ireland. And he took her up there to live, and he made her life a hell.

EMMY

Do you think that's a very tactful thing to tell a girl who's going to marry a Scotch-Irish Presbyterian and live in the north of Ireland?

KENNETH

I'd do anything to save you from such a terrible mistake. There's time yet.

EMMY

Please don't concern yourself with my ill-treatment if I marry Mr. Plunkett — James.

[*He shudders.*]

You still don't like the name?

KENNETH

I do not. It's the hell of a name.

EMMY

I love it. It sounds so stable and reliable and safe. And he's not 'dour' in the least. He's kind and jolly and reasonable. He wouldn't know how to look as cross as you do now. And his vocabulary doesn't consist of 'hells' and 'damns.' If you think that adds either force or charm to your conversation, you're wrong. If you weren't just an ignorant, uneducated boy, with a horizon no wider than that, bounded on one side by the polo field and on the other by Mutt and Jeff ——

KENNETH

If you weren't so 'well read' [*with infinite scorn*] and didn't think you knew it all, you'd have been satisfied to marry a decent, honest-to-God American, and wouldn't have lost your head when you got over there among all those slimy fortune-hunters ——

EMMY

Now, Kenneth, honestly. Stop being a hundred per cent American for a minute. Just be ninety per cent while I ask you what a fortune-hunter would be attracted by in a girl who hasn't two cents to rub together?

KENNETH

He might think you had.

EMMY

Do you think mother and I plotted to ensnare a greedy fortune-hunter, by pretending that I was an heiress? *Wouldn't* that have been a bright idea! I *wish* we'd thought of it.

[*He rises and walks sulkily to Left window.*]

I suppose the cream of the joke would lie in the *dénouement*, when he'd gotten me into his tumble-down hovel, all on the Irish shore, and learned that I'd tricked him. And then he'd beat me to death. And I'd certainly deserve it.

KENNETH

You're too clever for me, Emmy. I always knew that, but I know my point of view's all right. No good ever came of these mixed marriages.

EMMY

For Heaven's sake don't call it a mixed marriage. This isn't a case of miscegenation.

KENNETH

What's that?

EMMY

Marrying a negro.

KENNETH

You might just as well, so far as I'm concerned. And speaking of niggers, I'll bet there's a title in the woodpile somewhere. No American girl ever yet married a foreigner unless there was a title somewhere in the offing. Isn't there, in this case? Tell me. Be honest.

EMMY

Well, there *is* a title in the family. The Earl of Dromore is his second cousin.

KENNETH

You see, I wasn't such a darned fool after all. Is there any chance that your man will ever be it?

EMMY

I'm afraid there's no chance that he'll ever 'be it,' as you so quaintly express it. There are about ten lives between — James — and the title.

KENNETH

Gosh, Emmy! That's too bad. I'm sorry for you.

EMMY

Oh, don't be. A bright girl might manage that. Two unscrupulous females like mother and me, having deluded Mr. Plunkett into believing that he was marrying an heiress, would make nothing of getting rid of the interlopers between us and the title.

KENNETH

I don't see how you can have the heart to be funny in a discussion like this.

EMMY

You inspire me to be funny, you're so funny yourself.

KENNETH

I guess he's rich, all right.

EMMY

He is.

KENNETH

There aren't *any* rich men in Ireland.

EMMY

He is.

KENNETH

Then he's a profiteer.

EMMY

He's nothing of the kind. There's been money in his family for generations.

KENNETH

Big place?

EMMY

About two thousand acres.

KENNETH

Fishing?

EMMY

Yes.

KENNETH

Shooting?

EMMY

Fair.

KENNETH

Horses?

EMMY

Lots.

KENNETH

[*Walks to Right window, gloomily shaking his head.*] It's terrible. Terrible! What does he look like?

EMMY

He's very nice-looking, of course *I* think. He's not very tall, and he's rather heavy ——

KENNETH

Fat?

EMMY

No, I wouldn't say '*fat.*'

KENNETH

I'll bet *I* would. Well, short and fat then. How old?

EMMY

Now I'm afraid this will shock you.

KENNETH

Nothing can shock me now. How old? Much older than you?

EMMY

Quite a little.

KENNETH

How much? Thirty? Thirty-five?

EMMY

Worse than that.

KENNETH

Not *forty?*

EMMY

He's forty-nine.

KENNETH

[*Turning to look at her with incredulous horror.*] *What! Forty-nine! My God!* My *God!* But this is horrible. Forty-*nine?* Almost *fifty?*

EMMY

Do your own arithmetic.

KENNETH

[*Walking about in great perturbation.*] But this is very serious. It's a crime. It's outrageous. It's revolting. It's disgusting. It can't be allowed to go on. There's something wrong in all this. There's some funny business somewhere. You're not the Emmy Trowbridge I said good-bye to last winter.

EMMY

Oh, come. Forty-nine's not so old.

KENNETH

It *is* old. It's a perfectly awful age. Why, it's

nearly half a hundred. Ah, Emmy, *you* an old man's darling! I never thought ——

EMMY

[*Dramatically.*] May and December!

KENNETH

You're *not* the same girl I said good-bye to. You went to that poisonous old Europe, a sweet, innocent, unmercenary American girl ——

EMMY

The purest of God's creatures.

KENNETH

Oh, shut up! And you come back utterly spoiled, corrupted by titles and monocles and spats and the broad 'A' ——

EMMY

Oh, Kenneth, don't.

KENNETH

Let me finish. And you come back engaged to a fat old Irishman whose only claim to consideration is his money, and a title, which he hasn't got.

EMMY

Now, just listen to me a minute. He *is* an Irishman. I concede that point. He wears spats, but I've seen your hundred per cent ankles encased in them too. He doesn't wear a monocle and he doesn't use the broad 'A.' He speaks very much like us, only better.

KENNETH

How often does he say 'bedad' and 'begorra'?

EMMY

Only in moments of great mental stress. And he's not fat and *I* don't call him old. [*Goes to Right window.*]

KENNETH

What *do* you call old?

EMMY

Oh — ninety.

KENNETH

Well, I don't see much difference. I'll shoot myself the day I'm either.

EMMY

Here they are.

KENNETH

Who?

EMMY

Mother and Mr. — James. He stopped for her at the Harrisons'.

KENNETH

Oh, Lord! I didn't even know the man was here. Are they coming in?

EMMY

Certainly they're coming in.

KENNETH

Can I go out this way? [*Going Right.*]

EMMY

No, you cannot. I ask you to stay and meet him now.

KENNETH

It's asking too much, by thunder. I don't want to stay and shake his damned ——

EMMY

Now, now, now, *now*. Please stay and shake his palsied hand. You'll *have* to meet him sooner or later.

KENNETH

Well —— Perhaps I'd better have a look at him.

EMMY

And you'll be civil?

KENNETH

Yes, but don't expect me to gush.

EMMY

I won't.

[PLUNKETT *comes in Left.*]

PLUNKETT

Well, alanna, here we are.

[KENNETH *glares at him.*]

EMMY

[*Going to Plunkett.*] Oh — a — a — *James*, I'm so glad you've come. I want you to ——

PLUNKETT

'James,' is it? Grand, grand! Ah, bless your

little heart. You see, it's easy enough. You must follow the fine old name up with a kiss, asthore. [*Kissing her.*] And this young man ——?

EMMY

This is my very old and very dear friend, Kenneth Barbour. You've heard a lot about him.

PLUNKETT

Indeed and I have. And I've heard nothing but good, Mr. Barbour. [*Shaking hands.*] It's a real pleasure to shake the hand of Emmy's old — young friend.

[*Slight embarrassment as* KENNETH *remains silent.*]

EMMY

Where's mother? Let's sit down.

PLUNKETT

She'll be in directly. [*Sits on sofa with* EMMY *and takes her hand in his.*]

EMMY

Sit down, Kenneth.

KENNETH

No, thanks, really. I'm afraid I must go.

EMMY

Nonsense! You *can't* go without seeing mother. She'd never get over it.

KENNETH

Well, I'll wait a few minutes. But I'd rather stand, if you don't mind.

EMMY

Oh, very well. Be as uncomfortable as you like.

PLUNKETT

Have you told him, Emmy?

EMMY

I've showed him this. [*Showing ring.*]

PLUNKETT

Ah, now I understand the black looks of the boy. And I feel for you, my young friend. An old codger like me has little to do to be invading your great country and carrying away the toast of the county. Is that the way you see it?

KENNETH

Well, really, Mr. Plunkett ——

PLUNKETT

Don't be down-hearted. The Atlantic's no wider than a duck-pond these days. I'll be whisking the girl to and fro four times a year. Ten times a year. As often as she wants.

EMMY

Oh, four times ought to be enough.

PLUNKETT

That's as you please. And you'll be coming over yourself, and welcome. The sooner the better, and the oftener, better still.

KENNETH

I don't know that I care much about European travel.

EMMY

Oh, Kenneth, get off your stilts.

PLUNKETT

European travel, is it? Ah, I've no great liking for that myself. Here's the way of it, Mr. Barbour. You hop off your ship at the Cove of Cork, and there'll be Emmy and me waiting for you, in the Rolls, me waving a shillelagh and her a shamrock, and the chauffeur maybe waving a harp, and you'll leap in between us and sit there as tight as the tail in a cat and we'll hook it right away to the north. The roads are mending. I'll give the lads in the Free State credit for that, and in less than half a shake you'll be tucked away, with maybe a noggin of Irish toddy under your belt, in your little bed at Ballyumphane Castle.

KENNETH

Where's that?

PLUNKETT

It's where I live, and it's where I'll always be proud to welcome you, and twenty lads like you, when you cross the seas to learn how we treat this little girl in County Cavan.

EMMY

Oh, the influx won't be quite as great as that, Mr. — I mean, James.

PLUNKETT

I'll be the most mistaken man in the barony if it's not the truth I'm telling. And the most disappointed. I want to see Ballyumphane Castle full up with youngsters again. [KENNETH *looks blacker than ever*] and here's the colleen that will do the trick. And now, since you know the open heart and hand of me that all Emmy's friends will find when they come to Ireland, will you give me yours once again and say you wish me joy? [*Rising and holding out his hand.*]

[KENNETH *hesitates.*]

You're thinking me an old fool, Mr. Barbour, maybe, to be taking on the yoke of matrimony at my terrible advanced age.

[KENNETH *takes his hand.*]

Ah, I know how it is with the young chaps. They think a man of forty-nine has one foot in the grave and the other on a banana peel. Well, I'll not deny my forty-nine years, but I feel as full of the divil as Brian Boru at Clontarf. Shake.

KENNETH

[*Quickly disengaging his hand.*] Of course, I wish you luck. And I congratulate you, and all the rest of it. But [*looking at watch*] I *must* go, really. It's very late. I'll see Mrs. Trowbridge to-morrow. Give her my love, Emmy.

PLUNKETT

Never think it. I'll just step out and fetch Amelia. She doesn't know you're here. She'd cry

her eyes out over missing you. And it's herself you must congratulate as well.

[*Goes out Left.* KENNETH *watches him go, with a face of deep disgust, then turns the same look on* EMMY.]

EMMY

Well?

KENNETH

Well!!

EMMY

How do you like him?

KENNETH

Do you really want to know?

EMMY

You might start. I'll stop you if you get too unpardonable.

KENNETH

I guess I won't say anything. What's the use? Oh, Emmy, you *can't* love him.

EMMY

Can't love him? I adore him.

[*He walks to Left window and stands with his back to her.*]

[*Rising and standing by table.*] Is he as decrepit as you expected? Can't you at least be gracious enough to say that you think he's well preserved?

KENNETH

Oh, he looks healthy enough. If you count on

being a rich widow within the next thirty years, I think you'll get fooled.

EMMY

If you weren't behaving like such an unlicked cub, I'd be sorry for you. I don't know whether you're more ridiculous or more pathetic. Now that you've given him a clean bill of health, and if you can swallow his patriarchal age, what *can* you have against him?

KENNETH

I didn't like his talking Irish.

EMMY

Talking *Irish?*

KENNETH

Don't tell me he didn't, for I heard him at it. He said 'colleen' and 'mavourneen,' and another word — 'asthore.' What does that mean? 'Sweetie'? It made me sick.

EMMY

Why, that was just in fun. He knows it amuses me.

KENNETH

Well, it doesn't amuse me. And it was rotten taste for him to blow about his darned old castle.

EMMY

He didn't.

KENNETH

He did. He kept lugging in the word castle,

castle, castle, every other minute. Castle, my neck. I bet it's cold and draughty and hasn't any plumbing.

EMMY

I assure you it's quite habitable. And that's the name of the place. It's no more showing off for him to speak of Ballyumphane Castle than for you to speak of Elmwood.

KENNETH

It's nothing short of scandalous impudence for him to call your mother 'Amelia.'

EMMY

Oh, I think that's very cosy.

KENNETH

Well, at least, if there's anything left of the girl you used to be, you'll admit that you don't like his coarseness.

EMMY

Coarseness! In something he said just now?

KENNETH

Yes, coarseness. If you didn't think that a coarse allusion, and before me, too, then Europe *has* spoiled you for fair.

EMMY

Well, I may be a seething mass of corruption, but upon my word ——

KENNETH

Did you think it was particularly delicate and

refined for him to say that he wanted to see Ballyumphane Castle [*scornfully*] filled with children, and that you were the 'colleen' to do the trick? Old boaster!

EMMY

[*Laughing.*] Why, he didn't mean *that.* He never thought of such a thing.

KENNETH

Don't talk to me. I hope I have *some* sense left.

EMMY

Mighty little. He meant that he liked to see the place filled with young people, and he was good enough to infer that *I* would be an attraction.

KENNETH

Don't talk to me.

EMMY

Well, it's hardly worth while in your present mood.

[MRS. TROWBRIDGE *and* PLUNKETT *come in Left. She is an attractive woman of forty-seven.*]

MRS. TROWBRIDGE

Well, Kenneth, my dear boy. Give me a kiss. How well you look! And how brown! Now I feel we're really at home again.

KENNETH

[*Gloomily kissing her.*] It's certainly a great pleasure to have you back, Mrs. Trowbridge.

EMMY

You look it. Do cheer up. You might be welcoming Agrippina on her return with the ashes of Germanicus.

KENNETH

How are you, Mrs. Trowbridge?

MRS. TROWBRIDGE

My dear Kenneth, I hardly know. I'm so ——

EMMY

James ——

MRS. TROWBRIDGE

That's right, darling. It does my heart good to hear you say 'James.'

EMMY

James, come with me a minute, and look at those puppies. I want your advice. The vet. says ——

PLUNKETT

Cheer up the young chap, Amelia. It's not hard to see the news isn't just to his liking.

[*He goes out Right with* EMMY.]

MRS. TROWBRIDGE

Why, Kenneth, I'm so sorry. Sit here by me.

[*They sit on sofa.*]

Tell me, dear boy, you don't approve?

KENNETH

I'm afraid my approval or disapproval isn't of much importance, Mrs. Trowbridge.

MRS. TROWBRIDGE

But it *is* important, Kenneth. Next to Emmy, there's no young person whose affection means more to me than yours. Not even my own flesh and blood. Of course, it's because it will be taking Emmy to Ireland.

KENNETH

Well, don't *you* think that's an objection?

MRS. TROWBRIDGE

But she'll be back here constantly. And then you'll often be at Ballyumphane Castle.

KENNETH

[*Darkly.*] I shall never see Ballyumphane Castle.

MRS. TROWBRIDGE

Why, you absurd boy! What an attitude to take! Why not, pray?

KENNETH

I think I might expect you to understand my attitude.

MRS. TROWBRIDGE

But I don't at all. It isn't possible you've taken a dislike to Mr. Plunkett?

KENNETH

Mrs. Trowbridge, while we have this moment to ourselves, will you forgive me if I speak very plainly?

MRS. TROWBRIDGE

Why, yes. I suppose so. Yes. Of course. But really —— Why I expected you to congratulate me.

KENNETH

I can never congratulate either you or Emmy on this marriage.

MRS. TROWBRIDGE

Why not? [*Rising.*] You think I'm an old fool, I suppose?

KENNETH

[*Rising.*] I would never say that, Mrs. Trowbridge.

MRS. TROWBRIDGE

Whatever you might think.

KENNETH

I would never say that, Mrs. Trowbridge, but I *do* think you've been very hasty and unadvised in consenting ——

MRS. TROWBRIDGE

Well, upon my word, Kenneth Barbour. That will do. I never listened to anything so coolly impertinent in my entire life. Do you think a woman of my age, who is quite capable of making such an important decision for herself, cares anything at all for the opinion of an inexperienced baby like you, who ought to be spanked and put to bed?

KENNETH

A moment ago you said you valued my opinion.

MRS. TROWBRIDGE

Well, I don't now. [*Goes to window Left.*]

KENNETH

Because I won't fall in with this outrageous scheme and say it's fine.

MRS. TROWBRIDGE

[*Facing him.*] Outrageous scheme! Kenneth! My poor boy, are you out of your mind?

KENNETH

We don't speak the same language any more, Mrs. Trowbridge. Neither do Emmy and I. Six months in Europe have been enough to turn *her* head, and, I don't like to say it, but it seems to be the same with you. The splendors of Ballyumphane Castle ——

MRS. TROWBRIDGE

Oh, Ballyumphane Castle! Rubbish.

KENNETH

I think I'd better go. There doesn't seem to be ——

MRS. TROWBRIDGE

Indeed you won't go. One step. We must have this thing out. One of us is clearly crazy. Now you don't like Mr. Plunkett, but that's just boyish prejudice and I pay no attention to it at all. Aside from that prejudice, what valid argument have you to advance against this marriage?

KENNETH

First and foremost, his age.

MRS. TROWBRIDGE

His *age?* He's exactly two years older than I am. Does that make him out such a Methuselah? He's just the age he ought to be for such a match.

KENNETH

Oh, dear Mrs. Trowbridge, how *can* you say that? How *can* you, honestly? *Your* age is different. I suppose you're about as old as mother, but you have no age to me. I never think about it. You're just the sweetest, dearest, kindest, loveliest woman that ever was, but this man ——

MRS. TROWBRIDGE

We won't talk about 'this man' at all. It's easy to see, Kenneth, that you have nothing whatever against this marriage except that *you*, forsooth, don't like the bridegroom.

KENNETH

It isn't so much that I don't like the bridegroom as that I dearly love the bride, and had hoped for something so different.

MRS. TROWBRIDGE

[*Almost screaming.*] *Kenneth Barbour! Stop!* What do you mean? Why, this is perfectly horrible. My poor child.

KENNETH

[*Approaching her while she retreats to Right door.*]

What right have you to call it horrible? It was inevitable. Why, you must have seen it and known it always. There's never been a time ——

MRS. TROWBRIDGE

[*Her hand on doorknob.*] Don't come near me. You unwholesome, morbid, dreadful boy. Kenneth, are you intoxicated? That's the only excuse ——

KENNETH

No, I'm not intoxicated, and please don't go for a minute. You've got to hear me out. It's not too late. Perhaps I can stop this unnatural marriage yet.

MRS. TROWBRIDGE

'Unnatural'! You call *this* an unnatural marriage! I shall feel obliged to tell every word of this to your father and mother. I'm sorry, but I must.

KENNETH

They know already. I've told them.

MRS. TROWBRIDGE

And what did they say, may I ask?

KENNETH

They encouraged me. Father said faint heart ne'er won fair lady.

MRS. TROWBRIDGE

I'm going mad. I don't know if I'm more frightened or disgusted. Don't move. [*As he takes a step*

forward.] I must put a stop to this. [*Opens door and calls.*] James, Emmy, Sarah, Ellen ——

[Emmy *and* Plunkett *come in Right.*]

Oh, James, thank God, you're here.

Plunkett

Why, what's up?

Mrs. Trowbridge

I've been terribly frightened. [*Sinks upon chair, holding his hand.*]

Emmy

By him? What have you been saying to her?

Kenneth

I've been speaking very plainly.

Emmy

Haven't you guessed yet, solid ivory?

Kenneth

Guessed what?

Plunkett

Emmy, you rogue —— Och, give over. My dear young chap, don't you see your mistake? Sure, it isn't Emmy I'm marrying. It's Emmy's mother.

Kenneth

What?

Plunkett

I didn't know your trouble till just now. This bad girl never told me till she got me out in the stable, and I came the minute I knew.

EMMY

He was sitting down in the box stall, all over puppies, and he couldn't just extricate himself ——

KENNETH

I don't believe it.

PLUNKETT

Faith, my son, it's the truth. It's Amelia I'm marrying, though I don't deserve the luck. [*Raises her from chair, puts one arm around her and one around Emmy.*] I'd be proud to marry the two of them, but the illiberal laws won't give me leave. How happy could I be with either, were t'other dear charmer away.

KENNETH

[*To* EMMY.] Why did you let me make such an ass of myself?

EMMY

Because you needed the discipline. You burst in here, waving the wrong clipping and roaring at me like a bull of Bashan, and I haven't the faintest intention of putting up with that sort of thing.

KENNETH

But I don't understand yet. I can't understand *you*, Mrs. Trowbridge. Why were *you* so horrified to find *me* so horrified at Emmy's marrying a man so much older than herself? — (with all due apologies to *you*, sir). Especially when she wasn't going to at all?

MRS. TROWBRIDGE

You don't know why I was horrified?

KENNETH

No.

MRS. TROWBRIDGE

You don't know what I thought for a moment?

KENNETH

Haven't an inkling. What?

MRS. TROWBRIDGE

I'm not going to tell you, now. I'll tell you all to-morrow, perhaps. But I haven't the spirits just at present.

KENNETH

And that article in the paper. What about it?

EMMY

Oh, Kenneth! An article by poor Avis Avenel in the 'Dame Rumor' column of the 'Forestville Clarion'! You'll be believing the Weather Man next. She'd evidently got wind of an engagement in the family and mixed us up. And no matter what that poor soul says, I do hope you're convinced now that I'm to be James's step-daughter, not his wife. Though I'm perfectly certain he'd be a good husband to any girl, be she twenty-two, forty-seven, or ninety-five.

PLUNKETT

Thank you, my dear. Is your mind easy now, my boy?

KENNETH

Oh, yes. I'm sorry I was such a fool. But that was all your fault, Emmy.

MRS. TROWBRIDGE

And perhaps we'll see you at Ballyumphane Castle after all, Kenneth?

KENNETH

I shouldn't be a bit surprised. One of these days. If I can get away.

PLUNKETT

Maybe we might leave the young people together for a while, Amelia.

EMMY

The young people don't want to be left together. They've nothing to say that you can't hear.

KENNETH

I don't know that they have. I've shown you all plainly enough this afternoon what *I'm* after.

EMMY

What's that?

KENNETH

You.

PLUNKETT

More power to you, young Kenneth. The honest, straight ways of you go right to my heart. Sure, there's no more duplicity in the lad than there's snakes in Ireland. When he thought an old

man would be stealing his girl from him, he'd no idle civility for him and was all for sticking a knife in the robber's heart. You can trust him forever, Emmy.

KENNETH

Well, how about it, Emmy, since we're all being so candid? Would I ever do?

EMMY

You're too young, Kenneth. [*Takes* PLUNKETT'S *hand.*] The society of older men has spoiled me for boys. [*With her other hand she takes* KENNETH'S.] But, come around the morning of your forty-ninth birthday, and we'll take the matter up.

CURTAIN

THE SNAKE

PLAY IN ONE ACT

CHARACTERS

ARCHIE FOSTER
MURIEL SLOAN
MINNIE ANDREWS
ELIOT BLOUNT

Time: the Present

THE SNAKE

The scene is the living-room at the Andrews'. The room is entirely without charm and contains some hideous pieces of furniture. There are evident some rather pathetic attempts to render it more 'artistic.' Door Center. Windows Right. Fireplace Left with big sofa near it. Table Right Center. There is a low table before the sofa containing tea-things and whiskey and soda. Mirror Right.

ARCHIE FOSTER *and* MURIEL SLOAN *are sitting on sofa as curtain rises. They are attractive young people in the early twenties. Both are smoking.*

ARCHIE

[*Jumping up with empty glass in his hand.*] Don't let's wait any more. This is too damned ridiculous.

MURIEL

I'm not going before Minnie and Eliot come if I sit here till dinner time. I'm simply crazy to see them together. And I've *got* to see her ring. And please don't pretend that you've got anything important to do, for you know you haven't.

ARCHIE

I've got a lot of things to do.

MURIEL

Such as ——?

ARCHIE

Well — er —— There are a lot of things I could do.

MURIEL

I've no doubt. But you won't do them. You never do anything but just drift around. You're just as much use sitting here with me as you are anywhere else. This inability of perfectly idle young men to sit still and wait is just about *the* most idiotic thing I ever knew. Now if it were Eliot Blount it would be a different matter. *He* amounts to something and has *some* responsibilities.

ARCHIE

For the Lord's sake, stop booming Eliot Blount. He's a mighty decent fellow, and I like him, but if you people don't watch out, he'll soon be the most unpopular man in town.

MURIEL

He will be, with the more worthless element.

ARCHIE

Oh, is that so? Well, here's something the more worthless element is going to do right now, on the strength of that. It's going to have another drink. [*Pours it.*]

MURIEL

Oh, do you think you'd better? Aren't you making yourself almost too much at home?

ARCHIE

Certainly not. Didn't that Czecho-Slovak or

Jugo-Slav, who brought in the things, tell us to go to it until Minnie arrives?

MURIEL

The Andrews' always did have the queerest servants. I simply can't picture Eliot Blount at home in these surroundings.

ARCHIE

Oh, he's too much in love with Minnie to notice anything. [*Looking around room.*] By George, did you ever see anything so goshawful in your life?

MURIEL

Hush, Archie. Somebody might ——

ARCHIE

Why, that Balkan princess wouldn't know what we were talking about. And Mrs. Andrews is supposed to be out. However —— [*Opens door and surveys hall, then makes burlesque search of room. Looking under sofa.*] Come right along out of that now, Mrs. Andrews. Aren't you ashamed? Crawl along lively, now. Make it snappy. Why, it isn't Mrs. Andrews at all. It's just a shadow. All serene.

MURIEL

Idiot!

ARCHIE

Just as well the old lady wasn't under the sofa ten minutes ago, eh, Muriel?

MURIEL

What wretched taste!

ARCHIE

Why, it isn't kissing and telling to talk the matter over with one's fair co-partner in crime.

MURIEL

Yes, it is.

ARCHIE

I suppose that Eliot Blount ——

MURIEL

Eliot would be incapable ——

ARCHIE

You bet. Who'd you rather sit on a sofa with? Me or Eliot?

MURIEL

Eliot.

ARCHIE

Yes, you would. Eliot sitting like a ramrod at one end of the sofa and you languishing at the other while Eliot talked about the weather. Barometric pressure over the Great Lakes. Ha, ha! That's the only kind of pressure Eliot knows anything about.

MURIEL

Keep still. You're both tiresome and vulgar.

ARCHIE

Now hold on a minute. [*Prepares to sit on sofa*] Let me just ——

MURIEL

[*Rising.*] Indeed I won't. I don't know why I ever let you do it.

ARCHIE

I do.

MURIEL

Why?

ARCHIE

Because you like it.

[*She walks angrily Right.*]

Now don't get sore. Why, bless you, my dear, it's the custom of the country and the privilege of our emancipated generation. And what's a hug and a kiss between friends? We know it doesn't mean anything.

MURIEL

Look at this ghastly chair that poor Minnie's evidently been 'antiquing.' I suppose that's a sop to the pure, aristocratic taste of the Blounts.

ARCHIE

Jove, what wouldn't I have given to assist unseen at the Blounts' first call! Can't you see Mrs. Blount *and* the Colonel patronizing poor Mrs. Andrews?

MURIEL

Well, nobody'll ever patronize Minnie. She has too much dignity.

ARCHIE

Dignity never saved anybody yet from being patronized by Mrs. Blount.

MURIEL

Anyway, I doubt if they've ever been inside this house. Give me a cigarette.

ARCHIE

[*Lighting it for her.*] Oh, they must have. Haven't they officially recognized the engagement?

MURIEL

Oh, yes. Officially. They had to, even Colonel and Mrs. Blount, with a man like Eliot.

ARCHIE

Go easy, now.

MURIEL

When Mrs. Blount announced it to Mother on Monday, she spoke very nicely of Minnie. She said she was a sweet, charming girl, of whom she knew nothing but good. 'But,' she went on to say, 'there *are* drawbacks to this marriage which I needn't tell you, my dear. We have had very different views for Eliot. Of course any intimacy between ourselves and Mrs. — er — Mrs. — er — Andrews is out of the question. I shall call once, when I feel equal to it.'

ARCHIE

Oh, Muriel, it's Mrs. Blount to the life. Poor Minnie!

MURIEL

Well, I love Minnie and I think she'll be equal to

any position, but it *is* an awful match for Eliot, from a worldly point of view.

ARCHIE

Oh, I don't know.

MURIEL

Mrs. Dexter says she distinctly remembers Mrs. Andrews' mother when she kept a stall in the Front Street market, and Mrs. Andrews used to be there, as a little girl, with bare feet, washing celery.

ARCHIE

Well, my father says that Mrs. Dexter's grandfather used to be a stevedore not so very *far* from the Front Street market, so she'd better put a clamp on her vicious old jaws. She can have 'Gayly the stevedore' for *her* heraldic motto. All this talk about 'family' makes me sick, in a republic. The gall of people who live in glass houses ——

MURIEL

[*Sitting Right.*] That's all very well, Archie, and I agree with you to some extent, but society will always be like that. After people have had position for two generations they feel entitled to forget all about their antecedents and are terribly severe upon all newcomers. Now Eliot Blount could have married anybody in this country.

[ARCHIE *flings himself on sofa and pulls cushions over his head.*]

He has money and birth and looks and the highest principles ——

ARCHIE

Gosh, what a horrible description!

MURIEL

And he's got a splendid position. Responsible. Most responsible. And he has no bad habits.

ARCHIE

He has the bad habit of never seeing a joke. He has no more sense of humor than the silent cop out there.

MURIEL

He doesn't need to have.

ARCHIE

Well, I shouldn't like to have to live with Eliot's principles. It would be like living in a house surrounded with barbed-wire entanglements.

MURIEL

Minnie'll have no trouble that way. She's good as gold. Heavens! [*Putting up her hand.*] My earring's gone. Archie Foster, did you take my earring?

ARCHIE

Of course I didn't take your earring. I may have pinched your ear, but I didn't pinch your earring.

MURIEL

Well, where is it? I wouldn't lose it for anything. Look on the sofa. [*Searches around the room.*]

ARCHIE

[*Rummaging sofa.*] Are you sure you put them both on to-day?

MURIEL

Don't be a jackass.

ARCHIE

Wait. Here's some magazine shoved down here at the back. [*Pulls it out.*] And here's the earring. [*Gives it to her.*] By Jove, Muriel, look at this paper.

MURIEL

[*Adjusting earring at mirror Right.*] What about it?

ARCHIE

Look. It's a copy of that damned 'Searchlight.'

MURIEL

That disgusting sheet? Why, I thought it stopped publication months ago.

ARCHIE

So it did, but —— This is an old number. By thunder, Muriel, what do you think? It's the famous number, the issue that nobody ever saw. The one that was bought up by the Dexters on account of the description of that wild Fourth of July party at their house in the country. See the date. Saturday, July 9th. I wonder how on earth —— [*Sinks on sofa and reads.*]

MURIEL

I should think you'd be ashamed to read it. Father would never allow it in the house.

ARCHIE

Neither would my old man. Nobody ever allowed it in the house, but it sold like wildfire somehow or other. I always bought my copy frankly because I wanted to see what it said about all my friends. By Jove, Muriel. By the Lord Harry! [*Whistles.*] Look here.

MURIEL

[*Approaching sofa.*] What?

ARCHIE

Sit down. [*She sits.*] Look at this. Here's quite a decent puff for *you.*

MURIEL

That sort of paper is more offensive when it compliments you than when it slangs you.

ARCHIE

Yes, I dare say, but I'd rather be praised than slammed any day. And see this about poor Lilian Dexter *and* the midnight party in the pool. I don't wonder Mr. Dexter bought up the issue.

MURIEL

Of course it *was* the very wildest, most Bacchanalian orgy I ever was at, but it wasn't anything like so bad as this. And yet the facts seem to be correct enough.

ARCHIE

That's just it. The actual facts are all right. Somebody's given them the facts, and then some

slimy devil has written the thing up and added all those rotten innuendoes and unsavory speculations. You know they never did find out just how it was published or edited or anything. I think this was the last number.

MURIEL

Who do you suppose could have been mean enough to sell inside information to a scurrilous sheet like that? Probably some disgruntled servant.

ARCHIE

Well, of course, you know, some people *did* suspect poor Selina Rogers, and as she died in August ——

MURIEL

She might as well be allowed to bear the blame. Well, with all due deference to the dead, I can imagine nobody more likely to have done this very thing than Selina Rogers. Unattractive, unpopular, and simply bursting with envy, hatred, and malice. And always had to be asked *everywhere*. However, she's dead, poor thing, and I shouldn't speak like this.

ARCHIE

No, she's dead, poor thing and can't defend herself. [*Walks Right, slapping his hand with paper.*] But what a curious thing to find it here. I can't imagine Minnie ever looking at it even.

MURIEL

Not Minnie. Her mother. Just the thing the old

lady would devour. She probably flew for her copy before the Dexters had time to suppress it.

[*Voices outside.*]

Here they are. For mercy's sake, Archie, don't let Eliot know we found the thing here.

ARCHIE

No. Minnie would spend the rest of her life explaining.

MURIEL

Hide it. Take it with you.

ARCHIE

It won't go in my hip pocket. It makes my coat stick out.

MURIEL

Button it under your coat and remember to keep it buttoned.

[*As he does so, Center door opens and* MINNIE ANDREWS *and* ELIOT *come in. She is a charming girl of twenty-two, radiant with happiness. He is a good-looking man of thirty-two, of a naturally serious demeanor, but obviously as happy as she is.*]

MINNIE

I'm so sorry, Muriel dear, but you'll forgive me when ——

MURIEL

[*Kissing her.*] Never mind. God bless you. I'm so happy about this.

MINNIE

Well, so am I.

MURIEL

How about you, Eliot?

ELIOT

[*Grinning broadly.*] Oh, I'm reconciled.

[*They shake hands.*]

ARCHIE

I've congratulated *him* before. Good luck, Minnie.

[*They shake hands.*]

May I, Eliot? Just this once?

ELIOT

Just this once.

[ARCHIE *kisses* MINNIE.]

MINNIE

You've had tea.

MURIEL

I've had tea, and Archie's had whiskey.

MINNIE

I hope it was all right, Archie. I don't know anything about it.

MURIEL

Well, Archie knows *everything* about it. I'm afraid the tea's cold, Minnie.

MINNIE

I'm too excited to want any. Sit down.

[*She and* MURIEL *sit on sofa.*]

How about you, Eliot?

ELIOT

I'm too excited, too. No, *thank* you. [*As* ARCHIE *proffers decanter.*] I've never tasted a drop of bootleg liquor yet.

ARCHIE

Gosh, what a man to live up to, Minnie. Aren't you going to let Minnie shake up a cocktail for the boys *and* girls, when they drop in?

[*Sits Right.* ELIOT *stands by mantel.*]

ELIOT

If it's absolutely essential for her happiness, she shall.

MINNIE

Nothing's essential for my happiness except ——

ARCHIE

Except him. Well, that's just as well, for nobody'll ever *drop* in unless you're prepared to sling a drink into them.

MURIEL

Oh, do keep quiet, Archie. The moment anybody's engaged he begins to speculate where their liquor supply is coming from.

ARCHIE

It's damned important.

MURIEL

Now take off that glove and let me see it. *And* that bracelet. I saw *that* the second you came in. [*Holding* MINNIE'S *left hand.*]

MINNIE

He got me this just now, at Thornton's. That's why we're so late. Isn't it lovely?

MURIEL

Too wonderful. And that *ring!* I never saw anything so *perfect.* Are you going to do this every day, Eliot?

ELIOT

I'd rather like to.

MINNIE

And you can imagine how overwhelming it all is to *me.* Why, I never owned a thing that could be called jewelry, except this funny little turquoise ring that my dear old father gave me on my eighteenth birthday. See.

MURIEL

You oughtn't to wear it any more with that superb engagement ring. It makes it look ——

MINNIE

I'll *always* wear it. To stop wearing it now would make me feel —— Eliot doesn't mind.

ELIOT

You bet I don't. I think you're absolutely right. She's absolutely right about everything.

ARCHIE

Holy smoke!

MINNIE

Rather sweeping, eh, Archie?

ARCHIE

Just a bit.

MURIEL

Can't you admire these beautiful things?

ARCHIE

Don't know a damned thing about jewels. [*Going over and glancing at them.*] I can see they're all right.

MURIEL

Oh, can you, indeed?

ARCHIE

Awful economic waste, you know, Eliot.

MURIEL

Well, you're a good person to talk about economic waste.

ELIOT

Maybe so, Archie. [*Sits on Right arm of sofa next to* MINNIE.] But there *are* occasions when a fellow has just got to indulge himself in a little economic waste, if he's got the price. It's the only way he has of expressing — of expressing — certain — why — er — certain feelings.

MURIEL

And a very lovely way it is to express feelings. Lovely *and* tangible.

ARCHIE

Well, I'm unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, so circumstanced that I couldn't express those feelings that way. Even if I wanted to. Which I don't. We ought to go, Muriel. Give these people a show.

MURIEL

I'll go in three minutes. Don't I see a few drops of whiskey in that decanter that you've carelessly overlooked?

MINNIE

I'm sure there's some more in the house, Archie.

MURIEL

He shan't have any more than that.

ARCHIE

I don't want even that. *Come on*, Muriel.

MURIEL

[*Looking at watch.*] It *is* late. I'm coming. Give me one of your cigarettes first.

MINNIE

Here are some.

MURIEL

I like his.

[ARCHIE *advances to sofa, unbuttoning coat*

and the 'Searchlight' falls at ELIOT's *feet, who picks it up.*]

ELIOT

Hello! What's this?

ARCHIE

Let me have it. It's ——

ELIOT

I see what it is, all right. You rascal. Going around with contraband literature buttoned up under his coat. It's that filthy 'Searchlight.'

MINNIE

The 'Searchlight'? Why, I thought ——

ARCHIE

Give it to me. I'm big enough to read the 'Searchlight' if I want to.

ELIOT

[*Handing it to him.*] You're welcome to it. I hope the beastly thing isn't starting up again.

ARCHIE

[*Putting it in his pocket.*] This is an old number.

MURIEL

[*Rising.*] We must go.

ELIOT

What gets my goat is the idea of this iniquitous old scout hugging the 'Searchlight' under his coat

like a bad little boy with an indecent postcard. How long do you suppose he's being carrying it?

ARCHIE

I found it —— I mean I bought it ——

ELIOT

Found it! That's pretty good. I dare say all the people who used to read it said they found it. Well, good luck to you and your 'Searchlight,' Archie.

MURIEL

Do you mean to say that you never read it at all?

ELIOT

Never once.

MINNIE

You wouldn't. [*Rises.*]

ARCHIE

This puts *me* in a pleasant light. Well, I *did* read it. With a great deal of amusement. And so did practically everybody I know — except Eliot. Muriel lived for it.

MURIEL

I did not. I used to see it occasionally.

ELIOT

I didn't read it, but I don't feel too chesty about it, for I guess it gave me more satisfaction to be able to say I hadn't than it would to read all the

mean and mischievous tittle-tattle that seemed to be in it.

MINNIE

[*Going Right and straightening picture.*] Oh, don't let's talk about the 'Searchlight' any more.

ARCHIE

It was damned well written. Some of it.

MURIEL

And its accuracy was ——

ELIOT

That's just what I couldn't swallow. I used to hear a lot about its accuracy. And I think we know how to account for that. I don't blame the editor so much, whoever he was, for catering to the very meanest side of human nature. He was obviously the sort of man who didn't 'belong' anywhere. But when I think of one of our own lot of people, living right among us and betraying confidences and telling things she had no right to tell. Stabbing in the dark under the safe cover of anonymous contribution to a foul-mouthed paper ——

MINNIE

Why do you say 'she'?

ARCHIE

Lovely woman, of course. No mistaking the feminine touch.

MINNIE

Why do you say 'she,' Eliot?

ELIOT

I think you all know why.

MURIEL

Poor Selina Rogers.

ELIOT

Yes, poor Selina Rogers. She's dead, I know, and it sounds brutal, but, upon my word of honor, I think a snake like that is better dead.

MURIEL

Merciful Heavens, Eliot! I couldn't stand Selina myself. I thought she was simply poisonous, but I don't think she was quite worthy of death for doing this.

ELIOT

[*Smiling.*] I know it sounds exaggerated, but that's the way I happen to feel about it. Anything of the anonymous letter type. Striking in the dark, under safe cover. By George, I don't know how they feel about such things in the next world, but in my scheme of things there's absolutely no room for a treacherous snake like that.

ARCHIE

They needed a viper in heaven, so God took Selina away. To paraphrase the popular song. Come, Muriel.

MINNIE

I don't believe Selina ever wrote anything or contributed any information to the 'Searchlight.'

ELIOT

Don't you, my dear? Well, it's like you not to believe it.

MURIEL

Why not, Minnie? Do you know who it was?

MINNIE

I'm not going to say any more about it than that. But I don't believe it and never shall.

ELIOT

You don't have to believe it, Minnie, if you don't want to.

ARCHIE

It's a comfort to feel that he's going to allow you freedom of thought in your future life. *Come*, Muriel.

MURIEL

[*At door.*] Of course Selina didn't need the money.

MINNIE

There you are. Of course she didn't. Then why should she ——

MURIEL

But she had just as much malice as she had money. She did it out of sheer *gaieté de cœur*. Good-bye, my dear. [*Kissing her.*] I'll see you to-morrow or next day.

MINNIE

Good-bye. Good-bye, Archie. But remember, Selina didn't do it.

ELIOT

[*Very solemnly.*] I happen to *know* that Selina Rogers did do it.

ARCHIE

How do you know?

ELIOT

That's all I'm going to say.

MURIEL

So that's that, is it, Mr. Mussolini? Well, really, Minnie, since he's so set on it, and poor Selina's dead and probably doesn't know or care what we think about her here, don't you think we might let the matter rest there?

MINNIE

It almost looks as though we might.

ELIOT

Good-night, Archie. Don't lose the 'Searchlight.'

ARCHIE

When people know I have this number, it'll be worn out inside of a week. Good-bye.

[*He and* MURIEL *go out, closing door.* ELIOT *waits until their voices die away, then puts his arms around* MINNIE *and kisses her. She receives it passively.*]

ELIOT

What's the matter, Minnie? What is it, darling?

[*She releases herself, lays her hands on his shoulders and looks straight into his eyes.*]

Why do you look at me like that? [*Kisses her.*] Come here. [*Takes her hand to lead her to sofa.*]

MINNIE

No, dear. Wait.

ELIOT

Come. [*She lets him lead her to sofa, where they sit. He puts his arm around her and draws her head down on his shoulder.*] There. Isn't that all right? [*She nods.*] Won't you tell me what it is that's troubling you? You know I can't have you unhappy. I positively cannot.

[*She half sobs.*]

Why, Minnie, you're crying.

MINNIE

No, I'm not. I'm just thinking of something.

ELIOT

What? Tell me.

MINNIE

Perhaps I shall. After while.

ELIOT

Well, don't think about it now. Think about us. Isn't it great to have the first plunge over? To have everybody know we're regularly engaged and leave us alone?

MINNIE

Yes. Oh, yes. Of course it is.

ELIOT

And you know, my darling, it's for ever and ever. I'm not one of the people who believes it all ends here. All eternity, you and I, Minnie. Is that too much of a good thing? Does it frighten you?

MINNIE

[*Sitting up.*] *You* frighten me.

ELIOT

I? How? What do you mean? Little goose! [*Puts his arm around her.*]

MINNIE

[*Rising.*] No, Eliot. Sit still, dear, please. I want to move about the room. I want to think a minute. I want to — to talk about — something. Presently. [*Moves about room nervously, straightening pictures, etc.*]

ELIOT

What is it?

MINNIE

Isn't it a horrid little room?

ELIOT

No.

MINNIE

You *know* it is. *I* didn't use to know it. I never had any of that sort of taste. I never thought about

it. It was just what I was used to. Even when I went to other people's lovely houses, it never taught me a thing. It was only after I knew I was in love with you ——

ELIOT

And how long ago was that?

MINNIE

It was some time before *you* discovered that you cared about *me*.

ELIOT

Rubbish!

MINNIE

Well, it *was*.

ELIOT

And after you realized that you did — like — me, you experienced an æsthetic awakening. The scales fell from your eyes and you saw a great light and all that. Most extraordinary effect of love. But what did you do about it? You don't seem to have ransacked the kitchen for early American furniture.

MINNIE

I didn't know *what* to do about it. What I'm trying to say, Eliot, is that I sometimes feel — that our ways of thinking — our traditions — our whole past lives, are so dreadfully different —— You belong to an important — er — er — an historic family. And you've always had loads of money and you — why, you're fit to be anything or go anywhere ——

ELIOT

So are you.

MINNIE

Indeed I'm not. I'm just a penniless nobody, without any background whatever but this dreadful room, and I don't like to have you stoop ——

ELIOT

[*Springing up.*] Stop right there. I won't have you use the word 'stoop' in this connection. It's as much an insult to me as it is to you. [*Goes to her and seizes both her arms.*] What's got into you? Has my mother been saying ——

MINNIE

Oh, no, *no*. Nothing like that. She's been sweet to me. So have your sisters. So has the Colonel. Nothing could be kinder. It's just —— Oh, Eliot, why did you choose to fall in love with the most ineligible girl of your acquaintance?

ELIOT

Oh, what rot! Come here a second and I'll show you one reason. The most obvious one. [*Leads her to mirror Right.*] Look. What do you see?

MINNIE

I can't see anything but you. I never see anything but you when you're with me. And I don't think I ever see anything but you when you're away from me.

ELIOT

[*Kissing her.*] Oh, Minnie, you duck! You *are* adorable. You say the dearest things. I've always

thought you were the loveliest thing in the world to look at. But I'll tell you what clinched it. Do you remember the blue dress you wore last Thanksgiving, at that party at the Colemans'? That dress with the fringe and all those shiny things?

MINNIE

Yes.

ELIOT

Well, when you came down the stairs in that blue dress, and stood a moment on the landing, and looked about the crowd till your eye caught mine — that was the very second that I knew I couldn't get along without you. [*Laughing.*] It was that blue dress that did the trick.

MINNIE

[*Going Left and speaking half to herself.*] Isn't it cruel? Isn't it the devil?

ELIOT

Minnie, what do you mean? Are you offended? Why, my dear child, I didn't really mean that. You certainly looked ripping in that blue dress, but I'd have fallen for you just as fast in any other. [*Tries to take her hand, but she draws it away.*]

MINNIE

I hate that blue dress and everything it represents.

ELIOT

Isn't that rather rough on me, dear?

[*She sits on sofa. He sits on arm of sofa and lays his hand on her shoulder.*]

MINNIE

Oh, Eliot, the world is so horribly complicated for some of us. The gods, or whatever powers rule the universe, do play us such mean, mean tricks sometimes. It's so hard to know what's right to do.

ELIOT

Dear ——

MINNIE

Oh, not for you. You see your path straight before you, and you follow it, honorably, with your head in the air. I don't believe you ever have any doubts about anything.

ELIOT

Yes, I have.

MINNIE

No, you haven't. You see the wrong clearly, and you put it away from you. And you see the right clearly, and you do it. You're all of a piece, Eliot. Sort of cut out of a solid block of honor and decency and straightforwardness. I don't believe you could ever understand how very differently some of the rest of us are made. Me, for instance.

ELIOT

[*Smiling.*] You. I'm not worried about your make-up in the least.

[*She goes Right and stands with hand on back of chair. He watches her with an indulgent smile.*]

MINNIE

Why, even our ideas of right and wrong are different.

ELIOT

They don't differ much in essentials, I imagine.

MINNIE

They *do*, Eliot. Why — why — take this thing we were just speaking of. This question about the person, whoever it was, who wrote those things or furnished that information to the 'Searchlight' ——

ELIOT

Oh, don't let's talk about her.

MINNIE

But I must, for a minute. Now you think that what she — we'll say 'she' for the sake of simplicity — that what she did was absolutely unforgivable?

ELIOT

I'm afraid I do, Minnie.

MINNIE

Mightn't it be forgivable in a girl who didn't have any money and needed some, oh, so terribly ——

ELIOT

That excuse doesn't hold for Selina.

MINNIE

Selina didn't do it, I tell you. Leave Selina out of

it, anyway. Take the theoretical case of a girl who was dreadfully poor and yet lived among people who had everything in the world. And she wanted a little money, oh, very, very much. It is *so* hard to be without it.

ELIOT

I know *one* girl with little or no money who'd have starved sooner than do it.

MINNIE

[*With a gasp.*] Oh, *don't* say things like that. Suppose *I* had done it, Eliot.

ELIOT

[*Smiling.*] Suppose I had shot the watchman at the bank last night and broken into the vaults and made off with a few million dollars' worth of other people's securities. You might as well suppose that while we're about it.

MINNIE

I wish you had.

ELIOT

Sorry to disappoint you, my dear.

MINNIE

I wish you had, Eliot, just to show you that it didn't make one particle of difference to me. Oh, Eliot, I don't just love you because you're good and honorable and straight, though that's nice too. I adore you because you're just *you*, Eliot Blount, and

it wouldn't matter to me if you'd committed every crime in the calendar. I'd be sorry, but it wouldn't make me stop loving you, and I'd try to defend you, and lie and cheat for you, and *murder* for you if I had to.

ELIOT

Minnie, that's the sweetest thing I ever heard. It's perfect rot, and it's all wrong, but it certainly is nice to listen to. Come here.

[*She shakes her head.*]

Well, then —— [*He goes Left and takes her face between his hands.*] When I do anything that's really base and unworthy of you, dear, you'll never see me again.

MINNIE

[*Hysterically.*] Selina didn't do it.

ELIOT

I won't discuss Selina any more. [*Goes Right.*]

MINNIE

[*Coming Center.*] But *I* will. I won't have you believe it was she. Will you trust me and acquit Selina absolutely of having anything to do with the 'Searchlight'? If you'll say you do, I'll never mention her name again.

ELIOT

[*After lighting a cigarette slowly.*] It's a great temptation to say I will, Minnie, and let it go at that, but I can't truthfully. But why, my dear girl, should we bother our heads about the matter at all?

Selina's dead. There's no need to get up a crusade over her sepulcher. She and the 'Searchlight' will both be forgotten in another year. And anyway she was only vaguely suspected. Let's forget all about her.

MINNIE

Why are *you* so sure it was she?

ELIOT

Well, you remember the time the 'Searchlight' printed all that scandal about the Dabneys? I knew from that —— Frank Dabney told me ——

MINNIE

Oh, I see. I *see*. Of *course*. That *would* look as though it must have been Selina. And Frank Dabney. Of *course*. But you're both wrong. I happen to be able to give you the real name of the woman who supplied the 'Searchlight' with all its inside information.

ELIOT

What was it?

MINNIE

Minnie Andrews.

ELIOT

What do you mean by that?

MINNIE

Just what I say. It was I, *I*, Minnie Andrews. I am the snake for whom you have no room in your scheme of things, Mr. Eliot Blount.

ELIOT

I don't believe it. You're shielding somebody. Your mother ——

MINNIE

Oh, poor Mother. No, it was I. But Mother knew I did it, and she didn't think it was such a terrible thing to do at all.

ELIOT

I dare say not. But *you*, Minnie ——

MINNIE

I didn't either.

[*He sits on arm of sofa with his back to her.*]

So you see I was right, Eliot. Our ideas really *are* too different. I break our engagement now. To save you the ungracious task. Here are your presents. [*Lays ring and bracelet on table.*] We'll go through the time-honored ritual. I release you absolutely. You are perfectly free. May I say, better luck next time, Eliot?

ELIOT

Wait. What made you tell me? Why couldn't you have let me think it was Selina, when it made no difference to anybody?

MINNIE

I'm rather surprised at that question from *you*, Eliot. There are *some* things that even *I* couldn't do. I simply could not marry you, allowing you to believe that Selina and not I had committed this — this unpardonable sin.

ELIOT

That's rather decent of you.

MINNIE

And now —— I see no reason —— Why don't you go?

ELIOT

What ever induced you —— How *could* you do just *that?*

MINNIE

I *did* it. [*Goes Right and stands by table.*] I don't see why we should discuss it, Eliot. That, or anything else.

ELIOT

Tell me.

MINNIE

[*Sits at table with her elbows on it.*] Two years ago, very soon after the 'Searchlight' started, the editor approached me to see if I would care to make a little money by telling him about dates for parties ahead and what the women wore at them. Things like that. Not much harm in that, was there, Eliot?

ELIOT

No.

MINNIE

I made as much as thirty dollars a week sometimes. And that was a lot to me. And then one day, the time that Becky Wheeler's engagement was broken off so mysteriously, the man came to me and asked if I could tell him what the real reason was.

He offered me a hundred dollars, cash. All I had to do was to tell him the real facts, if I knew them. He would write it all up himself.

ELIOT

I don't see how you could do that. I absolutely don't.

MINNIE

I *did* hesitate at first. But there was nothing very damaging in the facts. And a hundred dollars looked so enormous to me. I'd never seen a hundred-dollar bill in all my life. I know it's a dreadful admission, but I wanted it for clothes. Just for clothes. All the girls I knew dressed so beautifully and went to the very best places. And I always looked so cheap and shoddy. I bought myself the most lovely and becoming hat with part of that money. It was just exactly right. And it gave me so much confidence. The first day I wore it I was conscious that I'd been nicer and more agreeable and more attractive than I'd ever been before. Isn't that ridiculous, Eliot, and contemptible?

ELIOT

Go on.

MINNIE

That's all there is to tell. You know the whole black secret now. Really, I don't see why this interview should be prolonged.

[*He rises, goes up Center, then comes to mantel and stands with his back to her.*]

ELIOT

Can you appreciate at all, just how horrible this particular sort of thing seems to me?

MINNIE

Yes. I can. Now.

ELIOT

There are so many other things you might have done that other people would have thought worse. But to me, this —— Just *this*. Don't you see, Minnie, it was such a betrayal of *esprit de corps!* So disloyal. You are one of the small group of people who make up what is called 'society' in this place. Everybody liked you. You had the *entrée* of any house worth going to. You were of the inner circle. Everybody spoke frankly before you, never dreaming ——

MINNIE

Never dreaming of the snake in the grass. I never betrayed anything that was told me in actual confidence, Eliot.

ELIOT

How could you betray your class by telling *anything*, anything at all, to an outsider who scandalously amplified everything you gave him and made capital out of it in his beastly paper?

MINNIE

It was never *my* class. I was an interloper, Eliot, an upstart, a mushroom, a climber. You knew that.

ELIOT

[*With a bitter laugh.*] Oh, my God! [*Pause.*] Didn't you ever feel any compunction when you saw what was made out of your information in the 'Searchlight'?

MINNIE

A little. At first. But I hardly ever saw it after while in print. I soon made myself feel that I wasn't responsible for their embroidery. Oh, we can all fool ourselves sometimes, Eliot. At least all of us can but you. [*Rising.*] And I was mercenary. I needed the money. You know a certain kind of woman will do anything for money. They paid me three hundred dollars once this fall. And with it I bought that blue dress I wore at the Colemans'. The one you said you liked. The one that 'did the trick.' [*Laughs.*] Isn't that irony?

[*He looks at her, then goes to door.*]

ELIOT

Who was that editor?

MINNIE

I won't tell you. You barely knew him by sight. He's gone away for good. To England, I think. I thought I'd done with everything connected with the 'Searchlight' long ago. That copy Archie found was one that mother was looking at this morning. Somebody came in and she pushed it down in the sofa. If it hadn't been for that ——

ELIOT

If it hadn't been for that — Ah, Minnie, why did he find it?

MINNIE

How absurd and how ungrateful! Think of your feelings if you had learned the hideous truth after we were married! [*He opens door.*]

Take those things with you. [*Pointing at ring and bracelet.*]

ELIOT

I can't Minnie, I can't.

MINNIE

Perhaps you think I'd like to sell *them*. I'll send them to you to-morrow. I have no need for money any more.

[*He hesitates, then comes back, closing door.*]

ELIOT

But, Minnie, I *love* you. Things can't end like this.

MINNIE

Oh, I think they can. [*He moves toward her.*] Stay where you are. Please don't come near me, Eliot. Listen to me. I gave them the facts about that wild party at the Dexters'. I gave them the story of why poor Mrs. Ellsworth wasn't presented at the Court of St. James's. I told them the rumor of Miss Lansing's relationship to old Judge Fallon ——

ELIOT

Minnie!

MINNIE

I told them —— But perhaps that's enough. Yes, I can see it is. And now, go. Please go. It's the only favor I shall ever ask of you. I am absolutely

dishonored in your eyes now. I can't bear to have you look at me.

[*Once more he turns to door and grasps the handle, then turns back again.*]

ELIOT

You're *not* dishonored in my eyes, Minnie. How can you say such things? It *does* shock me. I won't deny it. But I *do* love you still, I don't care what you've done. I can't imagine life with any other woman. That was a damned white thing you did there, telling the truth and clearing poor Selina's memory, when you needn't have said a word. All this wretched business is over and done with. Why can't we get married, my dear, and live happily ever after, and forget all about it? Let's do it. Can't we, Minnie?

MINNIE

No. We cannot.

ELIOT

Are you so sure?

MINNIE

Yes. Well —— Wait. Come here a minute, Eliot. Give me your hands this one last time. [*He takes her hands.*] Now look straight into my eyes. [*He does so for an instant, then drops his eyes.*] That's all. It's over, Eliot. [*He attempts to put his arms around her, but she stops him.*] Don't, please. It's an insult to me now. [*Goes Left to mantel.*] Go, please, or *I* will.

ELIOT

What made you do that?

MINNIE

I wanted to read your heart. And I did. It's easy enough to read. A heart like yours.

ELIOT

You couldn't have read anything there but love for you.

MINNIE

Ah, yes, I could, Eliot. Love's still there, perhaps, but something else is gone. Regard, esteem, confidence. Something. I can't exactly describe it, but it's gone forever, Eliot. It will never come back. And I couldn't marry you without it. The eyes I looked into just now weren't the same eyes I looked into a little while ago.

ELIOT

What nonsense. They *are* the same. Oh, how can I convince you?

MINNIE

You can't. [*Turns and looks into fire.*]

ELIOT

But even if — even if —— Ah, Minnie, let's wipe it all out. Say the word.

MINNIE

I can't. The incident is closed.

ELIOT

But my feeling for you is absolutely unchanged. And I'm so sorry for all ——

MINNIE

That I believe. But pity won't do. The incident is closed, I tell you. I know what I'm about.

[*He moves uncertainly Left, then opens door.*]

ELIOT

But in a town like this ——

MINNIE

I'll manage all that. Tell your family we've quarreled. Irrevocably. *They'll* get over it. That's all I'll tell my mother.

ELIOT

Oh, poor Mrs. Andrews. I wanted to do so much for *her*. I could have taken you both out of all this. I meant to make your life so happy.

MINNIE

[*Facing him.*] You made my life perfectly happy. For a little while. It didn't last long, but it was pure happiness while it did. Now *go*. Do you hear me? This instant. I'll never change my mind.

[*He gives her one more look, then goes out, closing door. She looks after him. The front door is heard to close. She looks into the fire a moment, then around the dreary room. She smooths the cushions on sofa, then picks up ring and bracelet and looks at them.*]

CURTAIN

THE MOUNTAINS OF BETHER

PLAY IN ONE ACT

CHARACTERS

Elise Pemberton, 14
Mrs. Fletcher, 56
Howland Pemberton, 60
Mrs. Pemberton, 52
Ernest Pemberton, 28
Ratcliff Willard, 27
Angelica Pemberton, 22

THE MOUNTAINS OF BETHER[1]

The action takes place in the PEMBERTONS' *living-room about five o'clock on a May afternoon. The room is cheerful and homelike. Large window Right. Fireplace Left. Door Center. Sofa near fireplace. Large table slightly Left Center. Armchairs either side of table. Chair above table. Armchair near window. Small chair by wall down Left.*

As curtain rises, ELISE PEMBERTON, *an extremely inquisitive-looking child of fourteen, comes in Center. Before closing door she looks up and down hall outside, then around the room, then goes straight to table Center, takes novel from it and sits Right by window. She turns pages quickly to find her place, then settles herself to read with concentration.*

MRS. FLETCHER *opens door slightly and looks in. She is a hustling, managing woman of fifty-six, and wears a hat.*

MRS. FLETCHER

Why, dearie! *Peep!*

ELISE

[*Laying book in chair beside her.*] Oh, is that you, Aunt Kate? [*Rises and comes Center.*]

MRS. FLETCHER

[*Coming in and closing door.*] That's just who it is.

[1] 'Bether' is pronounced to rhyme with 'ether.'

And what is this bad little girl doing indoors this bright, sunny afternoon, when she should be out in the good wholesome air running and playing and getting big and strong? [*Comes down to table taking off gloves, then kisses* ELISE.]

ELISE

I've *been* out. I'm fourteen, Aunt Kate. You don't just run and play when you're fourteen.

MRS. FLETCHER

Ah, my dear. Times have changed. When I was *fifteen* I climbed every tree on our place. Regularly. I was a great tomboy, I'm afraid.

ELISE

Well, I'm not.

MRS. FLETCHER

You might do far worse, Elise. What *were* you doing, just sitting here all by yourself?

ELISE

Nothing.

MRS. FLETCHER

Nothing? That's a very bad sign. Such listlessness in a child of your age is alarming. Most alarming. It's unnatural. It's symptomatic. Didn't I see you reading?

ELISE

Oh, sort of.

MRS. FLETCHER

What were you reading?

ELISE

Oh, just some book I found there.

MRS. FLETCHER

[*Smiling sweetly.*] Hasn't it a name, pet? Most books have names, I think. It's a little habit of theirs.

ELISE

What a darling hat, Aunt Kate. Isn't it new? Where did you get it?

MRS. FLETCHER

[*Straightening it.*] Little flatterer. I got it in New York last week. I'm glad you like it. A bit young, I'm afraid, for an old lady like Aunt Kate.

ELISE

Oh, it isn't one bit too young. [*Sits Right of table.*] Do sit down. Does Mother know you're here?

MRS. FLETCHER

[*Sitting left of table.*] She expects me. And now ——

ELISE

Oh, do tell me about Billy. What *did* the doctor decide about his antrim?

MRS. FLETCHER

Elise, Elise, you sly little ostrich. You're trying to throw dust in Aunt Kate's eyes, and you have to get up very early in the morning to do that, my dear. What was the name of that book?

ELISE

What book?

MRS. FLETCHER

This won't do, Elise. It absolutely will not do at all. I insist upon knowing the name of that book you were reading.

ELISE

It had some queer name. I couldn't even pronounce it.

MRS. FLETCHER

As I feared. Let me see it.

ELISE

But it's a queer sort of book, Aunt Kate. I don't think you'd like it. I just saw it lying there on the table.

MRS. FLETCHER

Are you going to hand it to me or must I get it for myself?

[ELISE *reluctantly goes right and picks up book.*]

ELISE

[*Looking at title.*] It's called 'The Mountains of' something. 'Beether' or 'Bether' or something. I can't see what it's about.

MRS. FLETCHER

[*Grimly taking book.*] I should hope not, my dear. It's a book that no little girl should be able to understand. Nor big girl either. Nor man nor woman. It's a book quite unfit to be read.

ELISE

[*With longing eyes.*] Oh, Aunt Kate, is it as bad as that?

MRS. FLETCHER

It's worse than that. Far worse.

ELISE

How do *you* know?

MRS. FLETCHER

That question smacks of impertinence, Elise. However, I'm quite sure that your father and your dear mother ——

ELISE

Are you going to tell *them* I was reading it?

MRS. FLETCHER

I never swerve from the line of duty, Elise.

ELISE

Well, do, then. I don't care.

[HOWLAND PEMBERTON *comes in. He is a dignified man of sixty.*]

PEMBERTON

Oh — er — Kate. I didn't know you were here.

[ELSIE *withdraws into window recess.*]

MRS. FLETCHER

My dear *Howland!* [*Rising and shaking his hand.*] I couldn't stay away.

PEMBERTON

You knew we had a very disagreeable scene in prospect?

MRS. FLETCHER

Certainly. Bessie told me. That's why I'm here.

PEMBERTON

Really, you know, Kate, I don't see why ——

MRS. FLETCHER

Howland! I feel it absolutely imperative that I should be present at this — this — confrontation. This exposure. You know my attitude toward Angelica's engagement to Ratcliff Willard from the first. And you know how weak Bessie is. I intend to support you with all the energy of which I am capable. You know what that means, I think?

PEMBERTON

Oh, yes. I know very well what that means. To be perfectly frank, Kate, I think the fewer people here the better. Bessie may be weak, but I'm not —— [*She smiles and shakes her head.*] You think I am?

MRS. FLETCHER

Of course you'll have Ernest.

PEMBERTON

Yes. He's here.

MRS. FLETCHER

I rely upon Ernest. I know *his* attitude. He has a bit of his old Aunt Kate in him.

PEMBERTON

Ernest feels strongly, even violently, in the matter.

MRS. FLETCHER

The trouble is, Howland, that you're so especially weak where Angelica is concerned. I can see you this afternoon looking very fierce and using very long words and then caving in at the last at a word from her.

PEMBERTON

Angelica won't be present. She's never left her room since I told her yesterday that this book, 'The Mountains of Bether,' was generally attributed to Ratcliff Willard. She denied it, but she seemed terribly wrought up.

MRS. FLETCHER

Wrought up! I should think so. To a sensitive, spiritual nature like hers the shock must have been —— And yet, after those first books of his ——

PEMBERTON

Would you mind keeping quiet for a few minutes, Kate? Stay if you like, but kindly leave the management of this affair to me.

MRS. FLETCHER

I shan't say a word. I think meddlesomeness is hardly one of my vices, Howland.

PEMBERTON

Why are you clutching that filthy book? Are you reading it again? [*Lights cigar.*]

MRS. FLETCHER

[*Throwing it on table.*] Reading it *again!* I never read it at all. Not actually. I wouldn't touch it; that is, I wouldn't touch it unnecessarily. But I'm sorry to say I took it just now from —— Where is she? [*Looking around.*]

PEMBERTON

Elise.

ELISE

[*Emerging reluctantly from window.*] Yes, Father?

PEMBERTON

What are you doing here?

ELISE

Why, I don't know, Father. I was just here.

PEMBERTON

So I see. Well, we don't want you here any longer. I told you distinctly to keep out of the way this afternoon.

ELISE

[*Going up.*] All right, Father.

PEMBERTON

I don't want to see you again until after Ratcliff leaves.

ELISE

Where shall I go?

MRS. FLETCHER

My children ——

PEMBERTON

This isn't a question of *your* children, Kate. We're dealing with a child of mine for the moment. Go and play with Sally Harper.

ELISE

I'm not speaking to Sally Harper.

PEMBERTON

Well, go and feed your guinea pigs.

ELISE

Oh, I've fed those guinea pigs. I've fed them and fed them and fed them. They'll bust if they eat another thing.

MRS. FLETCHER

Bust!

PEMBERTON

Stop, Kate. There's always your room to go to, Elise. I think that's the best place. Stay there until I send for you.

[*Sits left of table.* ELISE *goes to door.*]

MRS. FLETCHER

But the book ——

PEMBERTON

[*Annoyed.*] That's true. I was forgetting. Wait, Elise. Were you reading this book?

ELISE

I just sort of picked it up. It was lying there.

PEMBERTON

Were you reading it?

ELISE

Oh, just sort of. I was sort of glancing over it.

PEMBERTON

Don't you know that you're never to read any book unless Father sees it first and tells you it's a proper book for you to read?

ELISE

Yes. Of course. To *read* a book. To really *read* it. I mean, to read it through. But I thought it was all right to just sort of look at a book when it was just sort of lying there.

MRS. FLETCHER

My children ——

PEMBERTON

Out with it, Kate. Let's have it. We're bound to sooner or later. What about your children?

MRS. FLETCHER

My girls never read anything whatever until they were sixteen except Tales from Shakespeare, Louisa M. Alcott, Charlotte M. Yonge, and the Little Colonel Series.

PEMBERTON

Indeed!

MRS. FLETCHER

And, furthermore, *my* children have never lied to me.

PEMBERTON

I believe my children are not in the habit of lying to me.

MRS. FLETCHER

I know nothing about that. But my children tell Mummy everything. Everything. I know every thought —— [*She surprises an expression on* ELISE'S *face of disgust and flat incredulity.*] Are you going to let that child make faces at me?

PEMBERTON

Elise, were you making a face at your Aunt Kate?

ELISE

No, Father. No. Not at *her*. I was just sort of making a *general* face. I couldn't help it.

PEMBERTON

Go to your room.

ELISE

Yes, Father. [*Goes out.*]

MRS. FLETCHER

There hasn't been a face made in my family since Howard was four. His was the first *and last* face made beneath my roof.

PEMBERTON

Please let us drop the question of faces for a moment. [*Picks up book.*] I suppose he'll deny having written this thing.

MRS. FLETCHER

Undoubtedly. He'll deny anything and everything.

PEMBERTON

If he does, we have only rumor against his word.

MRS. FLETCHER

You're going to weaken, Howland. I foresee that I shall be left to bear the brunt of this thing alone.

PEMBERTON

I'm not weakening at all, but I'm a reasonable and fair-minded man, I hope, and you're an unreasonable and prejudiced woman.

MRS. FLETCHER

Prejudiced! I hope I *am* prejudiced. And if prejudice can save a pure and lovely creature like Angelica from the clutches of a depraved brute like Ratcliff Willard ——

PEMBERTON

Nonsense. If I'd considered him a depraved brute, I should never have consented to the engagement in the first place.

MRS. FLETCHER

But then he hadn't written this frightful book. And I warned you. I fought that engagement tooth and nail. You remember I said ——

PEMBERTON

[*Goes and stands looking out of window.*] Yes, I believe you said a great deal.

MRS. FLETCHER

His former books gave promise of this fearful culmination. And when I think of Angelica, so pure, so sweet, so refined, so sheltered, so — so — flowerlike ——

[MRS. PEMBERTON *and* ERNEST *come in. She is a pretty woman of fifty-two in a state of agitation. She mops her eyes with handkerchief as she enters.* ERNEST *is a dour young man of twenty-eight.*]

MRS. FLETCHER

[*Rising and kissing her.*] My poor Bessie!

MRS. PEMBERTON

[*As she is led to chair Left of table and installed therein.*] Oh, Kate, isn't it all too terrible?

MRS. FLETCHER

I think not so terrible, Bessie, since this most obnoxious young man is unmasked in time. Good-afternoon, Ernest.

ERNEST

How do you do, Aunt Kate? [*Leans on mantel.*]

MRS. FLETCHER

I know *you're* absolutely with us in this matter.

ERNEST

You mean you're all with *me.* Now. At last. Why, I sized that rotter up from the start. Insufferable young swine. All he did was to write smutty

books which decent people wouldn't read, and couldn't understand if they did.

MRS. FLETCHER

My opinion from the first. The very first. Almost my very words. Please do me that justice, Ernest.

ERNEST

Never saw him without wanting to kick him.

MRS. FLETCHER

The same with me, absolutely. And those long visits that Angelica was allowed to pay the Willards. How I advised against that! If your poor father had only ——

PEMBERTON

[*Coming to stand above table.*] Now I want it distinctly understood that I'll have no raking up of the past. And I won't be called anybody's 'poor father.' Is that understood, Kate? Please get it solidly lodged in your brain. Otherwise, please go before he comes.

MRS. PEMBERTON

Oh, Howland ——

MRS. FLETCHER

I'm not accustomed ——

PEMBERTON

I don't care what you're accustomed to. Take your choice.

MRS. FLETCHER

I can make allowance, Howland, for the strain under which you so obviously are laboring. I shall make no further comment unless my sense of duty imperatively demands it.

PEMBERTON

Well, if your sense of duty calls for any more remarks of the 'I told you so' order, out you go, if I have to put you out myself. And the same warning holds good for you, Ernest. *I'm* conducting this inquiry. Our family has got to present a united front to this young man. The whole thing's ruined if we begin to quarrel among ourselves. Do you understand, Ernest?

ERNEST

Certainly I do.

MRS. PEMBERTON

Oh, dear! Oh, dear!

PEMBERTON

If you're going to keep up that sniffling and sniveling, Bessie, I really think you'd better go upstairs.

MRS. PEMBERTON

I'm not sniffling and sniveling. I'm only blowing my nose. Can't I blow my nose? Everybody blows their nose. *You* blow your nose.

PEMBERTON

Are you going to cry after he gets here?

MRS. PEMBERTON

Yes.

PEMBERTON

If you do, my dear, you will have to leave the room.

MRS. FLETCHER

When do you expect him?

PEMBERTON

He should be here now. I sent him a night letter saying that his presence was required here immediately. He wired this morning that he'd be here at five. [*Choking sob from* MRS. PEMBERTON.] Positively, Bessie ——

MRS. PEMBERTON

I was just thinking what a dear little boy he used to be.

MRS. FLETCHER

Bessie, how can you be so mawkish?

MRS. PEMBERTON

And he had the prettiest manners as a child. I'll never forget ——

MRS. FLETCHER

I never cared for those finicky manners in a boy. A very bad sign. My sons had *decent* manners. No more. And look at them to-day. All outstanding, upstanding, clean-cut business men. And *look* at Ratcliff Willard. [*Points at book.*]

MRS. PEMBERTON

But we knew all his people on both sides so well. I don't see how ——

PEMBERTON

The Willards were all very well when they lived here in Pennbridge, in conservative surroundings. But after they went to New York and became involved with the intellectual set, so called ——

MRS. FLETCHER

And began to go to Beaux-Arts balls ——

PEMBERTON

This delay is most annoying. [*Looks at watch.*]

ERNEST

The fact is you're all getting jumpy.

PEMBERTON

Do you include me in that remark?

ERNEST

No, sir. I mean them.

PEMBERTON

I was never calmer in my life. I know exactly how I mean to proceed. And nothing but the profoundest silence is demanded from you three.

ERNEST

I wonder —— [*Crosses to window.*] By Jove, here he is.

[*Lights cigarette and sits on arm of chair near window.* PEMBERTON *rises.*]

PEMBERTON

Now remember. Leave it all to me, Kate. Bessie, control yourself.

ELISE

[*Opening door.*] I saw Ratcliff coming up the drive. I just thought I'd let him in myself. To save time.

[RATCLIFF WILLARD *comes in. He is an attractive young man of twenty-seven.*]

PEMBERTON

Leave the room, Elise, and close the door after you, and don't come near us again.

[ELISE *reluctantly obeys.*]

RATCLIFF

Good-afternoon. [PEMBERTON *bows stiffly.* MRS. FLETCHER *and* ERNEST *stare at him silently.* MRS. PEMBERTON *struggles with a sob.*] But what's the matter? Where's Angelica? Has anything happened?

PEMBERTON

My daughter, Angelica, is in her room.

RATCLIFF

Is your daughter, Angelica, ill?

PEMBERTON

She is not actually ill, young man, but in a state of grave distress

MRS. FLETCHER

In a state of collapse.

RATCLIFF

Collapse! But what do you mean? Won't some one tell me? Dear Mrs. Pemberton —— [*Comes down Left.*]

MRS. PEMBERTON

Oh, Ratcliff ——

PEMBERTON

Sit down, sir, if you please

RATCLIFF

Oh, but I don't please. I couldn't possibly sit down like that without knowing what's up. Can't I see Angelica?

PEMBERTON

You most certainly can*not* see Angelica, on this or any future occasion, until you have cleared yourself — if you can ——

RATCLIFF

Cleared myself! But what have I done? Please let me hear.

PEMBERTON

All in good time.

RATCLIFF

And as to my not seeing Angelica for an indefinite length of time, Mr. Pemberton, you can't mean that, sir.

ERNEST

Don't you fool yourself.

RATCLIFF

I'm speaking to your father.

ERNEST

If I were Father, I wouldn't answer you.

RATCLIFF

Oh, don't talk such rot. [*To* MR. PEMBERTON.] I'm sure you wouldn't do anything so inept as to send for me and then refuse to speak to me.

PEMBERTON

Certainly not. I am just about —— Please be still, Ernest. I will condemn no man without a hearing.

RATCLIFF

Well, really, you know, Mr. Pemberton, I can't tell on what subject to make myself heard until you enlighten me.

PEMBERTON

You have no suspicion?

RATCLIFF

None. I'm sorry to see you so depressed, Mrs. Pemberton.

MRS. PEMBERTON

Depressed! Oh, Ratcliff.

PEMBERTON

Bessie!

RATCLIFF

Wouldn't it cheer you up to shake my hand or

kiss me or something, and call me your dear boy, the way you always do?

PEMBERTON

I will permit nothing of the sort. Perhaps you had better sit down. [*Points to small chair down Left.*]

RATCLIFF

Thanks. [*Draws it forward.*] But I can't sit in it the usual way, and face everybody. It's too much like the dock. I'll do this, if you don't mind. [*Straddles chair and leans on back.*] This gives me a lot more confidence. Isn't it a curious thing? How do you account for that, Mr. Pemberton?

MRS. FLETCHER

That attitude is the very epitome of provocative impertinence. I wouldn't go on, Howland, until he sits around properly, like everybody else.

PEMBERTON

Hush, Kate. His attitude is immaterial. Are you ready now, sir?

RATCLIFF

I'm quite ready.

PEMBERTON

Very well, then. Are you prepared to answer my questions?

RATCLIFF

Why, yes, Mr. Pemberton, I think so. I can hardly imagine a question I'd hesitate to answer.

MRS. FLETCHER

The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth

PEMBERTON

Kate! If you please. Very well, then. Now. But first to go back a little.

RATCLIFF

Oh, please don't go back. For Heaven's sake, stick to the present. What's all this about?

PEMBERTON

You became engaged to my daughter, Angelica, I believe, about ——

RATCLIFF

I *know* I became engaged to your daughter, Angelica, the tenth day of last August. With your consent. I don't venture to say approbation.

ERNEST

Approbation, indeed.

RATCLIFF

Shut up! Well, sir? At least we can get together on that.

PEMBERTON

You had at that time written and published two — ahem — two books — novels, which, I am told, enjoyed a certain vogue among a certain class of reader.

RATCLIFF

I had. They did. 'Endymion Brown' and 'A Matron's Bones.' You knew all about them.

PEMBERTON

I did *not* know all about them. I'm not a novel reader. And even were I ——

RATCLIFF

Well, you ought to read them. They're not so bad.

PEMBERTON

I've no doubt I should find them very illuminating, but a salacious work of fiction ——

RATCLIFF

I'll never admit they're salacious, you know. And why do you say they are if you haven't read them?

PEMBERTON

I read quite enough. And heard more ——

RATCLIFF

You can dig dirt out of anything, Mr. Pemberton, if you have a nose for that alone. The Bible, Hardy, Shakespeare, Daudet ——

ERNEST

[*Rising.*] Are you going to stand for that, Father? For I'm not.

MRS. FLETCHER

Quite right. That young man's depravity is positively *Byz*antine.

PEMBERTON

Sit down, Ernest. We'll have no vulgar scuffle

here. This inquiry shall proceed along the lines I have mapped out.

MRS. PEMBERTON

I can't stand this. Really I can't. It's too much. I'm trembling like a leaf.

PEMBERTON

I think, if you would take Bessie to her room, Kate, and remain with her, you might safely leave this business to be dealt with by the men of the family. Come, my dear.

[*Raises* MRS. PEMBERTON *from chair.*]

MRS. FLETCHER

Indeed, I shan't budge a step.

PEMBERTON

Ernest, kindly take your mother to her room and return at once.

MRS. PEMBERTON

But I don't want to go. I know there'll be violence.

PEMBERTON

Nonsense, Bessie. Ernest, take her.

MRS. PEMBERTON

I can't go. I'd lose my mind up there, not knowing what you were all doing. I don't know what I want to do.

RATCLIFF

Can't we find a golden mean? How about the sofa? Why not recline, Mrs. Pemberton? Here

are all these nice cushions. And this pretty Roman blanket for your feet. [*Takes her arm.*]

ERNEST

[*Holding other arm and glaring at him.*] Let go of her!

MRS. PEMBERTON

That's what I'll do. I'll lie down. Thank you, Ratcliff. You always were a dear, sweet, understanding boy, I don't care what you wrote.

[RATCLIFF *establishes her most cozily on sofa.*]

PEMBERTON

It's a mistake.

MRS. FLETCHER

Don't be so weak, Howland.

PEMBERTON

Get up.

MRS. PEMBERTON

I won't get up. I shan't leave this sofa unless I'm torn from it.

RATCLIFF

Nobody's going to tear you, dear Mrs. Pemberton. Not while I have my health. You're my only friend here, God bless you. And don't worry about me. I never felt more self-reliant. Well, sir?

PEMBERTON

Well, to proceed. Where was I?

RATCLIFF

You were saying that my books weren't all they should be.

MRS. FLETCHER

They're By*zan*tine.

RATCLIFF

My depravity's *By*zantine and my books are Byz*an*tine. Don't wobble. Get it straight. Don't you like my plots?

MRS. FLETCHER

They should be burned by the hangman. The common hangman.

RATCLIFF

The *plots* should? Just how would he go about it? How can I keep my countenance, Mr. Pemberton, if she's going to say things like that?

PEMBERTON

Please don't interrupt, Kate, or we'll get nowhere. I intend to waive all discussion of your former 'works,' sir. Had I realized their tenor at the time I should never have consented to Angelica's engagement. You know my attitude towards them.

RATCLIFF

Based on very flimsy grounds. Why couldn't you have ——

PEMBERTON

Light and licentious fiction is not a department of literature in which I ever dabble.

RATCLIFF

What *is* your special field in literature, sir, if I may ask?

PEMBERTON

You are here to answer questions, not to ask them.

MRS. FLETCHER

I should think not, indeed.

RATCLIFF

Go ahead, then. Go *ahead.* Fire your questions. I won't stand this much longer.

PEMBERTON

[*Weighing book in his hand.*] Your pen has perhaps been idle since your last masterpiece dawned upon the admiring world. I refer to the one that had some bearing upon some — some lady's bones.

RATCLIFF

'A Matron's Bones.' Get that right, sir, for it's a great title. No, Mr. Pemberton, my pen's been very busy.

PEMBERTON

And what special line of edification has your pen pursued, if I may make so bold?

RATCLIFF

You may, sir. I've been collecting and revising various things of mine that have appeared in magazines. I think of publishing them as 'Fugitive Pieces.'

ERNEST

I bet they'll be just lovely.

MRS. FLETCHER

'Fugitive Pieces,' forsooth! Some people not a hundred miles away would be fugitives in good earnest if law and order were anything but a mockery in this country.

PEMBERTON

Kate, I beg of you. I hold in my hand, young man, a book whose title is 'The Mountains of Bether,' a book whose authorship is veiled in anonymity. And I, for one, am not disposed to blame the author for his modesty, though this quality of modesty is conspicuous by its absence from the subject matter. Do you know this book, Ratcliff Willard?

RATCLIFF

Why, yes, sir. I know it very well.

PEMBERTON

Take it in your hands. Scrutinize it. Make sure of its identity.

RATCLIFF

Really, it's unnecessary. Well, thank you, sir. [*Takes it and runs over pages.*] What, then?

PEMBERTON

Ratcliff Willard, are you prepared to affirm that you are not the author of this book?

RATCLIFF

Why, certain —— [*Stops short.*] Why do you ask?

MRS. FLETCHER

Yes or no.

RATCLIFF

Why do you ask?

ERNEST

Don't tell him.

MRS. PEMBERTON

You *will* tell him, or I'll tell him myself.

PEMBERTON

Bessie, be silent.

MRS. PEMBERTON

I won't. It was Angelica, Ratcliff. She behaved so strangely when Howland told her he knew you had written this book. She vowed you hadn't, but she's been in the most dreadful state ——

RATCLIFF

Let me see her.

PEMBERTON

You shall *not* see her.

RATCLIFF

I've no more idea of leaving this house without seeing Angelica than I have of cutting my throat.

MRS. FLETCHER

You might do far worse.

RATCLIFF

I shan't do either, Mrs. Fletcher. Set your heart at rest.

ERNEST

Well, then, speak up, if you're not a coward. Do you deny you wrote this thing?

RATCLIFF

[*Turning the pages and looking at them with a half smile.*] No. I don't deny it.

ERNEST

Fine. That's all you wanted to know, Father.

PEMBERTON

We have made headway. We have made headway at last.

[RATCLIFF *goes Left and leans on mantel, watching them.*]

MRS. PEMBERTON

Ratcliff, where *are* those Mountains of Bether? I've looked and looked ——

PEMBERTON

[*Impatiently.*] Oh, *Bessie!*

RATCLIFF

They're not in any atlas, dear Mrs. Pemberton.

PEMBERTON

All this is beside the point.

RATCLIFF

Let's come to the point, then. What *is* it, now that I don't deny the authorship?

PEMBERTON

The point is this, young gentleman. [*Lifting book.*] I dare say this outrageous book is, in some sense, what is called a success?

RATCLIFF

It's a huge success. It came out not quite a month ago, and a second edition's called for. It's received the most gorgeous notices from the most discriminating and intelligent critics in New York and London. In fact, I'm terribly afraid it's a best-seller. I'd hoped there was too much caviare in it for that.

ERNEST

Smut.

PEMBERTON

[*Rising and slamming book on table.*] Listen to me, Ratcliff Willard. Take all the satisfaction you can from your book's success. It may please the depraved palates of New York and London, but it won't go down in Pennbridge. Here, take it with you. And the sooner you leave my roof the better I'll be pleased.

MRS. PEMBERTON

Oh, Howland.

RATCLIFF

Let me see Angelica.

PEMBERTON

You're not going to see Angelica. The poor girl has completely broken down. She knew that the moment you acknowledged writing that book, I should declare your engagement at an end. Which I do, officially, here and now.

RATCLIFF

But you can't do that, you know, in these days.

ERNEST

Pup!

RATCLIFF

Oh, stop grunting those Anglo-Saxon monosyllables. Why, please, Mr. Pemberton?

PEMBERTON

Because the man who wrote such a book is no fit husband for a girl as pure and innocent and gentle and refined and sheltered as my daughter, Angelica.

RATCLIFF

I admit I'm not good enough for her, sir. No man is. But I'm not so bad, truly. And neither's this book. I wouldn't abuse it so savagely. Honestly, I wouldn't.

PEMBERTON

Good-day, sir.

RATCLIFF

No, but listen. Of course the theme's rather unconventional, and it's handled pretty boldly, but

it *is* well done, Mr. Pemberton, beautifully done. The English is marvelous and the construction ——

ERNEST

You hate yourself, don't you?

RATCLIFF

I can appraise a work of art dispassionately, even if it's my own.

PEMBERTON

This interview is at an end. Do you hear?

MRS. PEMBERTON

Oh, it can't be. Not like this.

PEMBERTON

There's the door.

[*Door opens and* ANGELICA PEMBERTON *appears. She is a lovely girl of twenty-two, obviously deeply agitated, and looking rather like a drowned lily. They all face her,* MRS. PEMBERTON *sitting up on sofa.*]

RATCLIFF

It's all right, old girl. I've *told* them I wrote it.

ANGELICA

Oh, Ratcliff, you *didn't.*

PEMBERTON

My poor child. This is most unwise. You shouldn't have come down.

MRS. PEMBERTON

Come to Mother, pet.

ANGELICA

Not just yet, dear. Let me sit here a minute.

[*Sits above table.* PEMBERTON *stands with hand on her shoulder.* ERNEST *stands with his hand on* MRS. FLETCHER'S *chair.*]

MRS. FLETCHER

She has a temperature. I can tell from here. Brute.

ERNEST

Never mind, Angy. At least we found out in time.

PEMBERTON

You shouldn't have come down. We had just settled this little matter quite satisfactorily.

ANGELICA

How?

PEMBERTON

I had just requested Ratcliff Willard to leave the house.

RATCLIFF

But I wasn't going, Angelica.

MRS. FLETCHER

If you were a man, you'd put him out, Ernest. Oh, if only my sons ——

ERNEST

I *will* put him out if he pulls any more of that stuff.

RATCLIFF

I just want to warn you not to go crazy and try.

PEMBERTON

I think it wiser for you to return to your room, my dear. Can't you leave this matter in your old father's hands?

ANGELICA

No, Father. Not possibly. Just give me a minute. I want to tell you all something.

RATCLIFF

No, she doesn't. Do as your father says, Angelica. I only wanted to tell you I'd confessed. Now go, like a dear. Everything will be all right eventually.

[*Approaches her, but* PEMBERTON *comes between them, motioning him back.*]

PEMBERTON

Stand back, sir. You understand that all is over between my daughter, Angelica, and you.

ANGELICA

What does he mean by that?

RATCLIFF

He means he's just declared our engagement at an end.

ANGELICA

Oh, Father, how absurd. You make me want to laugh, and I don't feel one bit like it.

MRS. FLETCHER

Well, upon my word.

ANGELICA

Stop, Aunt Kate. I want you all to listen to me.

RATCLIFF

They shan't. Are you crazy? Let me have the floor. I want to say a few words about this book, 'The Mountains of Bether' ——

MRS. FLETCHER

I shall not remain if that book is mentioned again.

RATCLIFF

Don't remain. [*She rises.*] I'm going to talk about it for five minutes. While I speak you can all be reading these press notices. [*Draws notices from his pocket.*] Here you are, Mrs. Pemberton. Here you are, sir. Ernest? Well, suit yourself. Here are two for you, Mrs. Fletcher, written by two of the most brilliant men in New York and London.

[*All but* MRS. PEMBERTON *reject them.*]

MRS. FLETCHER

New York and London! Sodom and Gomorrah! Take them away. [*Goes to door.*]

MRS. PEMBERTON

Give them all to me, Ratcliff. [*He complies.*]

MRS. FLETCHER

Howland, since you and Ernest, between you, are

unable to protect me from the persecutions of this — this — impudent varlet ——

RATCLIFF

But you're superb, Mrs. Fletcher. With a word you carry us right slam bang back into the spacious times of great Elizabeth.

ANGELICA

You shan't call him such names. [*Rising.*] Anyway, *he* didn't write that book. *I* did.

PEMBERTON

Angelica! You don't know what you're saying.

ERNEST

She's lying. To protect him.

RATCLIFF

Look here. Don't say she's lying.

ERNEST

Well, somebody's lying.

RATCLIFF

If you say 'lie' again, I'll knock your block off. See?

MRS. PEMBERTON

Boys, boys.

RATCLIFF

Angelica!

ANGELICA

Don't stop me, dear. They have to know some day.

MRS. FLETCHER

It's true. I can see it. It's only too true.

MRS. PEMBERTON

Is it, Angelica?

ANGELICA

[*Going to her.*] Yes, darling.

[PEMBERTON *sits Right and buries his head in his hands.*]

MRS. PEMBERTON

Kiss me. [ANGELICA *kneels and puts her arms around her.*] Well, all these people [*indicating clippings*] can't seem to say enough about it.

ERNEST

Perhaps we can keep it dark, Father. If only *he* doesn't squeal.

RATCLIFF

Keep it dark! You ought to be proud as peacocks. Every one of you.

MRS. FLETCHER

Look at your poor father. That strong man brought low.

ANGELICA

Oh, I know. I *am* sorry. For *him.* [*Goes to kneel beside him.*] Father, dearest, won't you forgive me some day?

PEMBERTON

I can't grasp it, Angelica. You've shaken my faith ——

MRS. FLETCHER

There. She's shaken his faith. If one of my children had shaken anybody's faith ——

MRS. PEMBERTON

None of your children *could* have written that book.

MRS. FLETCHER

I should hope not.

MRS. PEMBERTON

They haven't the brains.

MRS. FLETCHER

Brains! *Brains*, indeed! They have plenty of brains when it comes to things that are practically useful and not flagrantly immoral. Salesmanship and go-getting and making good. I'd rather see them dead at my feet than guilty of such a book as this.

RATCLIFF

I don't believe you know a thing about the book.

[*Gives clippings to* PEMBERTON, *who looks at them wearily.*]

MRS. PEMBERTON

Well, *I do*. I've read it through, every word. And I think it's *sweet*. I was afraid to say so before, but it's true. I think it's simply sweet.

RATCLIFF

Oh, 'sweet,' would you say, dear Mrs. Pemberton?

MRS. PEMBERTON

Yes, I would. That's just the word. I haven't enjoyed anything so much in years.

MRS. FLETCHER

I shall go. The atmosphere of maudlin impropriety which begins to pervade this house is insupportable to one of my temperament. [*At door.*] You'd better come with me, Howland. Get away from it all for a little while and pull yourself together.

PEMBERTON

No, thanks, Kate. I'll pull myself together presently, right here, I dare say. The atmosphere *is* confusing, just for the moment, but nevertheless it's the atmosphere of my own home. And this dazzling, daring phœnix that all the world's talking about, who thinks of things that never crossed her poor old father's mind, is only my little girl Angelica, after all.

ANGELICA

[*Sitting on arm of his chair and putting her arms around him.*] Oh thank you, Father, thank you. You make me so happy. You darling!

MRS. FLETCHER

Good-bye. This has been a day, indeed. And I repeat, if one of my children —— [*Goes out.*]

ERNEST

[*At door.*] I'm off, too.

MRS. PEMBERTON

Where are you going, boy?

ERNEST

Oh, to the club, I guess. Though how I'll ever face the fellows there again ——

RATCLIFF

Oh, come, even Pennbridge mentality isn't at so low an ebb as that. 'The Mountains of Bether' is a little masterpiece.

ERNEST

It may be good grammar.

RATCLIFF

Good grammar! Oh, Lord!

ERNEST

But it's smut.

ANGELICA

Don't say that, Ernest. Remember your sister wrote it.

ERNEST

Smut's smut, even if John the Baptist wrote it. Good-bye.

MRS. PEMBERTON

You're forgetting to kiss me good-bye, Ernie. [*He comes over and kisses her.*] I like that necktie. You do look so like your poor Uncle Willie sometimes.

ERNEST

Thanks. Wasn't he the one that had paresis?

MRS. PEMBERTON

Well, yes. But any one might have paresis. Good-bye, dearie. And *do* have your hair cut to-morrow. It's a disgrace.

ERNEST

Dis*grace!* Humph. Good-bye. [*Goes out.*]

ANGELICA

I'm sorry he feels ——

RATCLIFF

Don't give it another thought. Angelica, you've done a magnificent thing. It's smut to him, and that's all it will ever be to Ernest and his peers. But the people who know and understand —— By thunder, how proud I am of you! I hated shouldering the authorship even for a moment, but I thought it would just tide you over the first flood of family disapproval ——

ANGELICA

Will *you* ever be proud of me, Father? That's what I care about most.

PEMBERTON

Perhaps I should be, Angelica. All these literary chaps think you're a genius. I belong to such a different age. If Ratcliff had written it, I'd have turned him out without a moment's compunction.

ANGELICA

But you can't turn me out that way, can you, dear? I'm your child.

PEMBERTON

Yes, I know, but it's pretty hard to believe. How *could* you know such things, Angelica? Those complexes and all that stuff? Why, a young girl in my day ——

ANGELICA

I've read a good deal more than you realized, Father. And I've thought more, too.

PEMBERTON

You needn't tell me that, my dear.

ANGELICA

And don't worry too much about my generation, you dear old thing.

PEMBERTON

How can I help it?

ANGELICA

These things have always been in the world, but it's only my generation that's learning to handle them boldly and cleanly and decently ——

PEMBERTON

Oh, Angelica! *Decently?*

ANGELICA

Yes, decently. We're doing away with leers and winks and innuendoes and coming right out into the open. Don't you think the world will be a healthier place when all our souls are flooded with

sunshine and nobody's afraid to discuss *anything* in a decent spirit?

MRS. PEMBERTON

Mercy, child, there'll always be some things ——

PEMBERTON

I don't know, Angelica. I think the glare would blind me. Only be a good girl yourself.

ANGELICA

[*Kissing him and rising.*] Have no fears as to that. I'm hedged in by inhibitions inherited from my Philistine father and that Victorian on the sofa.

PEMBERTON

And in this book of yours, this 'Mountains of Bether,' in that scene where that young man and girl, who are so — so — attached to each other, spend that moonlight night in the ruined temple, how *could* you allow the reader to draw such objectionable inferences, even for a moment?

RATCLIFF

But that's all cleared up very soon.

PEMBERTON

Not soon enough. If a man unites certain chemicals, Ratcliff, so as faithfully to counterfeit the odor of the polecat and lets it burn beneath my window, and then tells me that what I complain of isn't really a skunk at all, the offense to my nostrils is not diminished by his explanation.

RATCLIFF

By Jove, sir, that's a good figure. May I use it?

PEMBERTON

I make you a present of it. But really, Bessie, how *you* could fail to be shocked by that situation, passes my comprehension.

MRS. PEMBERTON

You know I *didn't* read every word. That was just for Kate's benefit. I enjoyed the love story and that sunrise and the description of May in Sicily. And when I came to anything that sounded queer or unpleasant, I just skipped. I always do that and I always will. I think it pays.

ANGELICA

[*Pointing to her parents.*] How do you account for me, Ratcliff, biologically?

RATCLIFF

I don't. There's no accounting for you.

ELISE

[*Knocking and opening door.*] May I come in now?

MRS. PEMBERTON

Come in, darling. Come to Mummy. [ELISE *sits on sofa.*] Come, sit here, Howland, with this little girl between us. [*Sits up and he sits on sofa with* ELISE *between them.*] And don't look so sad. Hasn't everything turned out beautifully?

PEMBERTON

You help to make things turn out beautifully, Bessie.

MRS. PEMBERTON

Come nearer, Angelica. [ANGELICA *sits near them and* RATCLIFF *leans on her chair.*] That's better. Tell me one thing, pet. Where did you get that odd name, 'The Mountains of Bether'?

ANGELICA

From the Bible.

MRS. PEMBERTON

Well, now, I think that's very nice. Isn't it, Howland? What part?

ANGELICA

The Song of Solomon.

MRS. PEMBERTON

Well, I always thought it was a very pretty song. All those lilies and those — those animals and things.

RATCLIFF

It's held its own for several thousand years, Mrs. Pemberton.

MRS. PEMBERTON

Well, this is just too lovely. All of us here together this way. Except dear Ernie.

RATCLIFF

I can spare dear Ernie this one evening.

MRS. PEMBERTON

He'll be all right when he has his hair cut. I suppose you couldn't repeat that verse about those mountains, could you, Angelica?

ANGELICA

Oh, yes, I could. Give me your hand, Ratcliff. 'My beloved is mine and I am his. He feedeth among the lilies. Until the day break and the shadows flee away, turn, my beloved, and be thou like a roe or a young hart upon the Mountains of Bether.'

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